

Don DeLillo in Context: Readings in Biography, History, and Religion

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Introduction: DeLillo after *Underworld*

I. “The Art of Living Has No History”

In 1971 Roland Barthes wrote in “From Work to Text”: “It is not that the Author may not ‘come back’ in the Text, in his text; however, he can only do so as a ‘guest,’ so to speak.”¹ As this key sentence ought to indicate, “From Work to Text” is partly a response to Barthes’ own polemical piece “The Death of the Author”. In that 1967 essay he insisted that “the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author,” because “it is language which speaks, not the author.”² “From Work to Text” indicates that perhaps the threat of “ransom” (*doit se payer*) has begun to be taken seriously. The fifth proposition of the essay is no less than Barthes’ signal for the author to re-enter the scene of reading: “If the author is a novelist, he inscribes himself in his text as one of his characters, as another figure sewn into the rug; his signature is no longer privileged and paternal, the locus of genuine truth, but rather, ludic.”³ Most evocatively, Barthes calls this new author—or, rather, this new understanding of the author and a reader’s relation to the author—a “paper-author,” “*un auteur de papier*.” And this adjective or qualification (“de papier”) is precisely at the crux of Barthes’ conception of authorship: his author is one constructed of paper, composed of legible instances. Gone now is “the relation of antecedence a father maintains with his child,” as he described the relation between the author and the author’s text.⁴ The paper-author is constituted only in and through acts of reading, and it is subject to the reader’s “active collaboration,” his or her act of writing.⁵ There is no human personality within the text to be

¹ Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” trans. Josué V. Harari, in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Poststructuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (London: Methuen, 1980), 78.

² Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” trans. Richard Howard, *Aspen Magazine*, no. 5+6 (1967): Section 3.

³ Barthes, “From Work to Text,” 78.

⁴ Barthes, “The Death of the Author.”

⁵ Barthes, “From Work to Text,” 80.

sought, no Fatherly, authorial intent to be deciphered, no consciousness to engage and to perceive. There is only a paper-author stitched together with words.

For a practitioner of biography as much as for a critic endeavored on the reading of any author in his or her entirety, Barthes' proposition is crucial. Neither has the author "died" in Barthes' understanding, nor are texts now in any sense un-authored. He means to alert us to the same reality of textual engagement that Giorgio Agamben saw in Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?," that is, that "every inquiry into the subject as an individual must give way to the archival record that defines the conditions and forms under which the subject can appear in the order of discourse."⁶ Before I even begin to study DeLillo and his writings, I am thrown back on the mediation of texts. There is an author but he is a paper-author because I discover him only in words. And even if were to see him and meet him, his real presence, in order to be transmitted, would be committed to paper, to the screen, or to audio recording. This is what Barthes meant when he wrote that "the art of living has no history: it does not evolve: the pleasure which vanishes vanishes for good."⁷ Barthes recognized that the bodily presence of the author—that physiological entity—leaves only the barest trace on text. And for our purposes this also means that the author-as-text—the one we encounter in interviews, in anecdotes, in physical descriptions—is always being interpreted anew, especially as the writings connected to its signature continue to be presented to us for our perusal, study, and enjoyment.

As such, I maintain: *Underworld* rewrote its author.

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, "The Author as Gesture," in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 64.

⁷ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 50.

II. (Un)Linking DeLillo and Baudrillard

At a conference on literature and culture recently, one of the moderators at a panel on Don DeLillo said, “It was like a ‘Fuck you’ to his critics. He was resisting that link, that link people’d been making between him and Baudrillard.” The topic of discussion was *Cosmopolis*, a novel by DeLillo published in 2003 which charts the day-long limousine ride of a twenty-eight year old financier named Eric Packer. “You’ve got the Schuster book, you’ve got people labeling him ‘post-modern,’ reading him with post-structuralist criticism. And it didn’t always work that well, did it? And he took the chance to say we’d gotten it wrong.” For three of the four people talking, *Cosmopolis* was a lackluster addition to our libraries. Uncharitably, it might be called a disappointment. My own apathy toward the novel aside, I found it hard to imagine DeLillo reading any of the critical texts that I myself lined up next to his novels on my bookshelf. Had he, in fact, read Marc Schuster’s *Don DeLillo, Jean Baudrillard, and the Consumer Conundrum*? For that matter, had he even skimmed or perused Gary Adelman’s *Sorrow’s Rigging*, Joseph Dewey’s *Beyond Grief and Nothing*, or David Cowart’s *The Physics of Language*? More than this, could I believe DeLillo had felt a need to *respond* to these texts? However unrealistic I considered such a state of affairs, it was also not necessary, I recognized, for DeLillo to have had intention in order for those of us still gathered in conversation to believe *Cosmopolis* was indeed such a response.

Barthes’ reintroduction of the author as a “paper-author” ought to remind us that “Don DeLillo” as he is biographically constructed in criticism, as he will be in this Introduction, takes shape within a welter of texts joined together by unnumbered readers. In an era when such a luminary of postmodern literature as Brian McHale can publish articles entitled “What Was Postmodernism?” (2007) and “Reconstructing Postmodernism” (2013), and when the literary for-

tunes of such writers as Stanley Elkin, John Hawkes, and even William Gaddis appear to have plummeted—to see the interest in DeLillo not only maintain its steady trend but increase significantly is relieving and intriguing alike to the scholar who has even ambivalently attributed to DeLillo a place in the PoMo camp. “There’s been Mark C. Taylor’s *Rewiring the Real*. That has a section on *Underworld*,” one panelist ventured. “Right. And there’s the Hungerford book. That’s a major one and it has a chapter on DeLillo.” I mentioned, as well, Michael Naas’ book-length commentary on Jacques Derrida’s *Acts of Religion*, entitled *Miracle and Machine*, which contains four inter-chapters which reflect on *Underworld* in light of Derrida’s texts.

The point of this brief foray into DeLillo’s recent reception outside the bounds of classic postmodernist literary theory is that it informs our perception of DeLillo—the author, the human being, the paper-author—especially in relation to the preceding thoughts on *Cosmopolis*. Seeing DeLillo—at the conclusion of an era of postmodern literature with which he was deeply implicated—retain an influence and exert interest, withstanding the vagaries of fickle esteem, compels us as readers and interpreters to see him anew like a *primae impressionis*. The moderator who read in *Cosmopolis* a refusal of Baudrillard—as of the critics willing to establish a link between that French philosopher and the American novelist—attributed his perception of that refusal to a parodic imitation of Baudrillard in the character of Eric Packer. Packer, he argued, waxes eloquent on a variety of topics in a manner that translates easily into Baudrillard’s preoccupations with technology, simulacra, the end of history, profusion, etc. And yet Packer is narcissism incarnate, apathy a-riot, hollowness *par excellence*. Packer is a character slowly brought to the edge by DeLillo, a character finally murdered by an enraged ex-employee. The conclusion is apparent by this logic: Baudrillard is dead. This logic, however, only seems apparent this side of postmodernism and Baudrillard’s biological death in 2007. According to Linda Hutcheon and

Malcolm Woodland, “parody” is a “doubled structure, incorporating backgrounded aspects of the parodied text of the past into the foreground of its present self.”⁸ However, this incorporation is by no means simple, it may be “fundamentally ambivalent or paradoxical.” Hutcheon and Woodland claim that parody “cannot help inscribing and granting authority to what it parodies, even if it aims to challenge it.” Indeed, reviewers of *Cosmopolis* like Greil Marcus in *Artforum International*, Walter Kim in *The New York Times Book Review*, and James Wood in *The New Republic* all took the novel quite seriously in its intentions whether or not they appreciated its ultimate aims.⁹ Wood, in fact, wrote with his usual acerbity, “Eric is given to riffing on contemporary culture and technology, in a Baudrillard-bruised language evocative of an assistant professor of cultural studies with, alas, an MFA.”¹⁰ Even in parody the object of ridicule or satire may thus sound too strongly.

The idle conversation that arose at that conference—which I have perhaps subjected to an excessive amount of interpretation—suggests in a colloquial way how scholars of DeLillo construct him biographically. To imagine him in conversation with his critics, to envision his perturbation over a connection made between his novels and the work of Baudrillard, is to fashion an idea of an author—of the body that writes and to which a signature is assigned. There is no reason to assume that this entails an investment in the Father-author as opposed to the paper-author, it merely signals the attention newly paid to certain texts. In this case, the text is *Cosmopolis* and the author being conceived is one beyond postmodernity, unlinked to Baudrillard. Moreover, it is a casual example of the construction of authorship generally. And with these terms and strategies

⁸ Linda Hutcheon and Malcolm Woodland, s.v. “Parody,” *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Greene and Stephen Cushman, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1002.

⁹ Greil Marcus, “Cosmopolis,” *Artforum International* 42, no. 4 (2003): 50; Walter Kim, “Long Day’s Journey Into Haircut,” *New York Times Book Review*, April 13, 2003, 8; James Wood, “Traffic,” *The New Republic*, no. 4604 (April 14, 2003): 30-3.

¹⁰ Wood, “Traffic,” 30.

in mind, I turn to the overturning of identity that occurred with the publication of *Underworld*, a profound upheaval that is the genesis of my ensuing reflections on the intertwinement of religion and literature in the writings of Don DeLillo.

III. Getting It “Wrong”: New York Ethnics and *Underworld*

A portrait of DeLillo in the words of Daniel Aaron:

He sits on a stair in a hallway and gazes unsmilingly into the camera, his expression severe and suspicious. He looks alert and intense and unrelaxed, almost prim. Coatless, open-collared, sleeves rolled, he might be an intellectual apartment house super with a hidden past (some refugee from graduate school? a lapsed priest?) wary of interrogators.*¹¹

In the edited volume where Aaron’s essay appears, *Introducing Don DeLillo*, the asterisk at the end of this paragraph leads a reader to a note at the bottom of the page: “Photograph of Don DeLillo, *Rolling Stone* (17 November 1988).” Aaron’s subject here is not “the fiction of Don DeLillo,” “the structure of DeLillo’s novels,” or “themes in the work of Don DeLillo”—although all these are touched upon. “How to Read Don DeLillo” is, rather, the exposition of a simple question: it is a question of the author known through his writings. “*Who is Don DeLillo?*” Aaron asks.¹²

One succinct and unserious reply to the question has already been quoted. “[A] lapsed priest?” Aaron demurs from that speculation, writing elsewhere: “DeLillo’s presumably Roman

¹¹ Daniel Aaron, “How to Read Don DeLillo,” in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 67.

¹² Aaron, “How to Read Don DeLillo,” 67.

Catholic upbringing rarely surfaces in his books...”¹³ And yet to quote that sentence to its end: “...although his accounts of the spiritual and carnal excesses of his seekers, prodigies, terrorists, spies, academicians, gangsters, entrepreneurs can be read as the musings of a crypto-Christian and profane moralist who finds his most rewarding subject matter in the precincts of a fallen world.” Describing the trajectories of DeLillo’s characters when they are caught in webs of conspiracy and espionage, Aaron says their movements are in “quest of spiritual independence and self recognition,” but also admits that “they are likely to fall into the chaos they had hoped to shape and correlate.”¹⁴ Throughout the essay Aaron hints at a real thrust within DeLillo’s fiction toward “transcendent answers”¹⁵ but refrains from pinning it to DeLillo as either a genuinely fundamental conceit of his fiction or as an inalienable characteristic of the novelist himself. With regard to these explicit, and other less direct, gestures toward the religious sentiments in circulation for DeLillo, Aaron is perhaps treated unfairly by John Paul Russo in his chapter on DeLillo in *The Future without a Past* (2005). “Aaron’s treatment of DeLillo’s religion displays the superiority of inattention,” Russo writes with the eager aplomb of a ready reprimand.¹⁶ But Russo was by no means over-zealous when he implied that Aaron, like other critics, “overlooked the ethnic component in DeLillo’s fiction.” He then quotes Aaron’s extremest and likely only gaffe in an otherwise intuitive and comprehensive essay. “I think it’s worth noting,” Aaron says, “that nothing in his novels suggests a suppressed ‘Italian foundation’; hardly a vibration betrays an ethnic consciousness.”¹⁷ On this point—although no doubt mixing the questions of religion and ethnicity—Russo justifiably critiqued Aaron, as well as Pearl K. Bell for her 1992 review-essay

¹³ Aaron, “How to Read Don DeLillo,” 68.

¹⁴ Aaron, “How to Read Don DeLillo,” 70.

¹⁵ Aaron, “How to Read Don DeLillo,” 68.

¹⁶ John Paul Russo, *The Future without a Past: The Humanities in a Technological Society* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 212.

¹⁷ Aaron, “How to Read Don DeLillo,” 67-8.

“DeLillo’s World,” when he wrote, “If Bell and Aaron had not been so eager to see DeLillo one-sidedly as a postmodernist,¹⁸ and if they had appreciated his Italian Catholicism and ethnicity, they might have excavated their foundations in his work, even before he himself brought them nearer to the surface in *Underworld*.”¹⁹ And yet there is the rub: *Underworld*.

It is not unimportant to note at this juncture that one of the main critics who gravitated toward DeLillo early in his career and advocated for his scholarly relevance was of the same generation and similar ethnic background. Frank Lentricchia (b. 1940) wears his Italian-American identity nonchalantly, incorporating Italian-American characters into his novels and publishing essays on Italian-American literature. In addition, Lentricchia was the editor of *New Essays on White Noise* (with Emory Elliot) and *Introducing Don DeLillo*, both published in 1991. And his personal correspondence with DeLillo goes back at least to the late 1980s. Lentricchia is by no means alone in this connection. Thomas DePietro, the editor of *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, is more subdued in the displays of his ethnic heritage than Lentricchia, nevertheless he edited *Frank Lentricchia: Essays on His Works*, contributed a foreword to the new edition of Cleveland-born Italian-American Raymond DeCapite’s *A Lost King*, and has been an advisory editor to the journal *Italian-Americana*. Nor do the ethnic origins of a few of DeLillo’s principal admirers escape attention: Anthony DeCurtis, Paul Giaimo, Elise Martucci, Paul Civello. The aim of this digression on Italian-Americana is to pose a question regarding Russo’s assumptions about *Underworld* and its relation to the rest of DeLillo’s oeuvre. Is it a coincidence, I wonder, that a number of DeLillo’s first perceptive critics and some of his earliest advocates shared at least a hint or a taste of his own ethnic background? Russo’s critique of Aaron and Bell assumes that DeLillo’s “Italian Catholicism and ethnicity” were ascertainable or apparent before

¹⁸ Aaron neither uses this term, nor does he appear to imply it.

¹⁹ Russo, *The Future without a Past*, 213.

the publication of *Underworld*. Yet when I browse the pages of his earlier fiction—scanning from *Americana* (1971) to *Mao II* (1991)—it is unclear where Russo might precisely locate the bled-hand of ethnic origins in DeLillo’s fiction. No doubt the name gives something away. And Russo cites, “[f]or the record,” two stories “about New York ethnics,”²⁰ “Take the ‘A’ Train” (1962) and “Spaghetti and Meatballs” (1965),²¹ which remain uncollected and generally unappreciated, having garnered a single piece of serious analysis.²² In addition there were the interviews, scattered across the pages of journals and newspapers, that sometimes plainly noted his background, even if nothing more was made of it. Nonetheless the question remains. Who but other Italian-Americans of a certain generation, like Russo himself, born in the early 1940s and of Italian descent, would have been primed to understand or been keyed-in to the experiences and preoccupations of this “ethnic” Don DeLillo? Before the publication of *Underworld* in 1997, among the uninitiated there were certainly others who made Aaron’s mistake, albeit without his casual confidence, when he asserted that DeLillo’s “name could just as well be Don Smith or Don Brown.”²³

In retrospect, of course, Aaron’s blunder is glaring. Part Six of *Underworld*, Arrangement in Gray and Black, Fall 1951–Summer 1952, is drenched in the delight of a coming home. The lingo of midcentury Bronx, its denizens and delicatessens, the street-patter of childhood games, and a hesitant ardor for the Church suffuse these pages. “*Sboccato*,” “*salugi*,” “folded copies of *Il Progresso*,” “*u’gazz’*,” “*scucciament’*”—words, phrases, references multiply as DeLillo dwells

²⁰ Russo, *The Future without a Past*, 212.

²¹ DeLillo acknowledged at the 2013 National Book Festival that, in addition to these two stories, he wrote, at the beginning of his career, other such stories set in “the Italian Bronx,” which remain unpublished. (*Don DeLillo: 2013 National Book Festival*, perf. Don DeLillo and Marie Arana [The Library of Congress, 2014], The Library of Congress: Webcasts.)

²² Fred L. Gardaphé, “(Ex)Tending or Escaping Ethnicity: Don DeLillo and Italian/American Literature,” in *Beyond the Margin: Readings in Italian Americana*, ed. Paolo Giordano and Anthony Julian Tamburri (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998), 131-51.

²³ Aaron, “How to Read Don DeLillo,” 68.

on the people and the borough of his youth. Elise Martucci argues that “there is a center of [*Underworld*] to which all events, themes, and characters directly or indirectly relate.”²⁴ “This central point,” she says, “is New York City, more particularly the small area of the Bronx surrounding Arthur Avenue, known as Belmont.” And Belmont is indeed the area of The Bronx in which DeLillo was born and raised. More than this, DeLillo has himself acknowledged that he feels a nearness to the central character of *Underworld*, Nick Shay, whose upbringing shares significant similarities to DeLillo’s, as Russo has demonstrated.²⁵

These resemblances and affinities cannot be ignored, particularly when they reorient readers and critics in their relation to everything in DeLillo’s previous writings from his abiding sense of place and landscape to his innumerable allusions and references to Catholicism. Nor have they been. Tony Tanner, for instance, lambastes DeLillo in the wake of *Underworld*, accusing him of outright “religious fanaticism.”²⁶ And from another angle, it is hard to imagine seeing anything pre-*Underworld* like either Amy Hungerford’s analysis of DeLillo’s ethos of writing in relation to the ecclesiastical retirement of the Latin Mass or Mark C. Taylor’s analysis of the themes of waste, systems, and American religiosity in DeLillo’s work.²⁷ Leaving aside the obvious fact that *Underworld* is the catalyst for Tanner’s critique, the culmination of Hungerford’s analysis, and the central text in Taylor’s meditation, the ramifications these essays have on other of DeLillo’s texts is manifest: they posit unequivocally the centrality of Roman Catholicism and by extension DeLillo’s Italian-American identity to the reading of these texts. This is the author

²⁴ Elise A. Martucci, *The Environmental Unconscious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 107.

²⁵ Russo, *The Future without a Past*, 221.

²⁶ Tony Tanner, “Afterthoughts on Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*,” in *Don DeLillo*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003).

²⁷ Amy Hungerford, “The Latin Mass of Language: Vatican II, Catholic Media, Don DeLillo,” in *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 52-75; Mark C. Taylor, “‘Holy Shit!’: Don DeLillo, *Underworld*,” in *Rewiring the Real: In Conversation with William Gaddis, Richard Powers, Mark Danielewski, and Don DeLillo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 156-249.

post-*Underworld*. Whereas earlier novels like *Americana* or *The Names* tested and probed the texture of religiosity—Pentecostal, Episcopalian, and Roman Catholic—*Underworld* definitively centers the loci of scholarship on DeLillo in the reflections on New York ethnics in the early short stories, the difficulties of religious selfhood in *Americana* and *Mao II*, and—projecting forward—the mutual impacts of Catholicism and Sunni Islam in a post-Christian, perhaps post-secular world, evident in the essay “In the Ruins of the Future” and the novel *Falling Man*, both of which center on the events and aftershocks of September 11th, 2001. This does not mean that other approaches to DeLillo’s writings are infelicitous or unnecessary. They merely respond to different iterations of the paper-author Don DeLillo. Surveying the field of current literary criticism, it is apparent that DeLillo-as-Postmodernist is one iteration that still garners a fair amount of interest.²⁸

My own approach to DeLillo, however, is crucially informed by this post-*Underworld* religious and ethnic proclivity. I aim in this thesis to begin uncovering more systematically than has been previously done the biographical and historical contexts out of which DeLillo grew. The final chapter of the thesis here presented applies this recovered or uncovered knowledge to a close-reading of the terrain of deserts and the mentality of asceticism present in DeLillo’s writings, especially in *Running Dog* and *The Names*.

IV. Summary

The three chapters of this thesis address three different approaches to DeLillo’s writings: biographical, historical, and thematic, respectively. Each chapter provides a critical context for its approach, explaining the contributions of some previous critics, the salience of the approach for

²⁸ Jeffrey Ebbesen, *Postmodernism and Its Others: The Fiction of Ishmael Reed, Kathy Acker, and Don DeLillo* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Randy Laist, *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo's Novels* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010).

my own and for earlier analyses, and the unique method I present. In addition, every chapter attempts to bring a new interpretation or reading to the texts at hand. As such my thesis is both programmatic and exploratory.

Chapter 1, “New York Made Me,” opens with a description of two “portraits” of DeLillo. For critical and popular readerships alike, DeLillo seems to have two faces: austere and humane. I briefly detail these portraits, speculating on their conceptions, before presenting my own encounter with a third portrait. This third portrait, which I sketch from his appearance at the 2013 National Book Festival, is what I term the “banal” DeLillo. However as I dwell on this portrait, and struggle with an inability to reconcile it with my own preconceptions of the author, I uncover a dimension of DeLillo that leads me to a sense of at least limited understanding. The realization that DeLillo is a kind of “ethnic outsider” prompts my desire to account for aspects of his biography that haven’t been sufficiently addressed. As such there follows a section on DeLillo’s artistic origins and Catholic identity. Finally, the chapter concludes with a lengthy reflection on immanent, embodied Catholicism as it arises in *White Noise*.

Chapter 2, “The Early Fiction of Don DeLillo and the Spiritual Sixties,” takes as its focus three stories by DeLillo published between 1960 and 1971: “The River Jordan” (1960), “Take the ‘A’ Train” (1962), and “In the Men’s Room of the Sixteenth Century” (1971). In this chapter I attempt to write a speculative history of DeLillo’s 1960s while analyzing these stories. More precisely, the aim is to interpret DeLillo’s pieces of fiction with, through, and against the religious or spiritual events, movements, and trends that occurred or arose during this time period. In addition, I pursue an argument concerning the stories themselves; namely, that DeLillo’s early fiction reveals an overwhelming preoccupation with religiosity which must be progressively attenuated until it can be approached with objective or ethnographic detachment. This detachment

is finally achieved in “In the Men’s Room of the Sixteenth Century” and *Americana*; but its dynamic structure remains active in DeLillo’s subsequent fiction.

Chapter 3, “Returning from the Wilderness,” explores the asceticism and the desert landscapes apparent in *Running Dog* and *The Names*. I begin with the contention that DeLillo’s depiction of asceticism undergoes an alteration with *The Names*. Specifically, DeLillo transitions from an almost unequivocally negative appraisal of asceticism and its practices, as displayed in *Running Dog*, to a fuller appreciation of its potential regenerative qualities, as displayed in *The Names*. Then drawing on Black Knife’s monologue in *Americana* and Mark C. Taylor’s discussion of “systems” in *Rewiring the Real*, I provide a theoretical context for this transition. Briefly, each of DeLillo’s characters enact a variant of the following tripartite movement: entrance into wilderness, habitation in that landscape, and attempted return to society; and Taylor’s argument is that systems are essential to life yet often repudiated by characters in *Underworld* and *Point Omega*, who are products and victims of the “excess” systems inevitably create, either destroying or transforming them. The rest of the chapter is given over to an in-depth analysis of *The Names*, which tries to account for its progress in terms of Black Knife’s monologue and Taylor’s systems.

Chapter 1: “New York Made Me”

“You know that Graham Greene book called *England Made Me*? New York made me. ... There’s a certain sensibility, a sense of humor, an approach, a sort of dark approach to things that’s part New York, and maybe part growing up Catholic, and that, as far as I’m concerned, is what shapes my work far more than anything I read.”
—Don DeLillo²⁹

I. Meeting Don DeLillo

“When I managed to get to Athens in September, 1979, and not long after I met him,” Thomas LeClair mused in 1982, “he handed me a business card engraved with his name and ‘I don’t want to talk about it.’”³⁰ Although the aura of myth that saturates DeLillo’s discouraging business card has persisted for many years, LeClair himself admits that it “was half a joke.”³¹ And yet there is something that resonates in the anecdote. When I think of the Bronx novelist, it is not always in terms of sentences and literary influence; a body and a personality intrude on such thoughts. “At forty-three,” LeClair wrote, “DeLillo in his jeans and sneakers has the look of a just-retired athlete. He walks Athens’ crowded streets like a linebacker, on his toes, eyes shifting, watching for crazed drivers among the merely reckless.” Nor is LeClair the only critic or interviewer to ruminate on DeLillo’s physicality. Mark Binelli noted in 2007 that “His default expression, at least when he’s being interviewed, tends to the severe, that of a priest from some obscure ascetic order.”³² And there is, as well, DeLillo’s stark sarcasm, his almost aggravated wit. When Jonathan Franzen, for instance, described *Americana* as “a bunch of guys in a car, basically,” during an on-stage public discussion with DeLillo, the older novelist replied simply, “A

²⁹ David Remnick, “Exile on Main Street,” *The New Yorker* 73, no. 27 (September 15, 1997): 45.

³⁰ Don DeLillo, “An Interview with Don DeLillo,” interview by Thomas LeClair, *Contemporary Literature*, 23, no. 1, pp. 19-31. Rpt. in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*. Edited by Thomas DePietro. (University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 3.

³¹ Tom LeClair, “Why Do Novelists Hate Being Interviewed?,” *Salon*, 2010, August 7, 2010

³² Don DeLillo and Mark Binelli, “Intensity of a Plot: Mark Binelli Interviews Don DeLillo,” *Guernica: A Magazine of Art & Politics*, July 17, 2007.

bunch of guys in a car...” underlining the reductiveness of Franzen’s pithy summary.³³ By many accounts, DeLillo exudes the gravitas and indifference of an elder statesman—one taut with the energy of an athlete.

In contrast to the DeLillo whose temperament and mythos inclines editors to emphasize the “rarity” of his interviews, there is another DeLillo whose affability and humanness practically delights. This other persona is on display most glowingly, perhaps, in his replies to fan-mail, a large collection of which is held by the Harry Ransom Center in their Don DeLillo archive. In response to a dissertation student who had sent him a series of twenty questions regarding *The Names*, DeLillo patiently answers all of them.³⁴ The clarity and charitableness of his reply, in fact, lends the answers a genuine significance in their illumination of that novel. And replying to numerous other casual readers, obsessive fans, and forward academics, DeLillo maintains a similarly admirable equanimity, humor, and good nature, frequently responding to multiple letters by the same sender. And he seems to exhibit this kind manner on a more immediate level, too. Jesse Kavadlo wrote in a brief newsletter article entitled “Meeting Don DeLillo”:

But as I walked away he called back: “Jesse!” No amount of Barthes or Foucault, reception theory or reader response, could have prepared me for the visceral fanboy jolt of hearing DeLillo call my name, or what came next: he asked me to sign my book for him. (And so: “I never imagined *I’d* sign a book for *you*.”) Then he amended his own signa-

³³ *A Conversation with Don DeLillo and Jonathan Franzen*, Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, Celeste Bartos Forum, New York City.

³⁴ *DeLillo Archives*, Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Box 109, Folder 3.

ture in *White Noise*, no longer just “To Jesse, A reader, Don DeLillo,” but now, to “A reader and writer.”³⁵

Clearly, an interaction occurred between Kavaddo and DeLillo that not only dispels the typical critic-author antinomy, but that further solidifies an image of the DeLillo who neither maintains “distance,”³⁶ nor cultivates “neutrality,”³⁷ as two interviewers have conjectured.

These accounts are by no means mutually exclusive. DeLillo’s affability and reserve often crop up as talking-points for the same interviewer and, indeed, there might also be something to Mark Binelli’s aside: “at least when he’s being interviewed.” The natural complexity of any biographical subject inclines the scholar to outline various personae or characters that imbricate and metamorphose in the space of one human being. Yet a certain severity, a kind of aloofness, and a peculiar nervous energy, reappear continuously in descriptions of DeLillo; they tend to govern conceptions of the author. In one respect, this is self-fashioning. The photograph by Joyce Ravid that graces the back flap of the dust cover of *Libra* and the head-shot by Michael O’Brien for the National Portrait Gallery both capture a hard or a forlorn but ever-leather-jacketed author. And hardly any photograph of DeLillo that might appear on his books conveys even the hint of a smile. At another level, this image and conception of his severity may result from merely imbibing DeLillo’s subject matter. It is indeed reminiscent of an aura that comes with dwelling on paranoia, conspiracy, terrorism, and trauma. Finally, this state of affairs might be linked to DeLillo’s status as an “outsider” of the American tradition, a position which some

³⁵ Jesse Kavaddo, “Meeting Don DeLillo,” ed. Anne Longmuir, *The Don DeLillo Society Newsletter* 4, no. 1-2 (June 16, 2011).

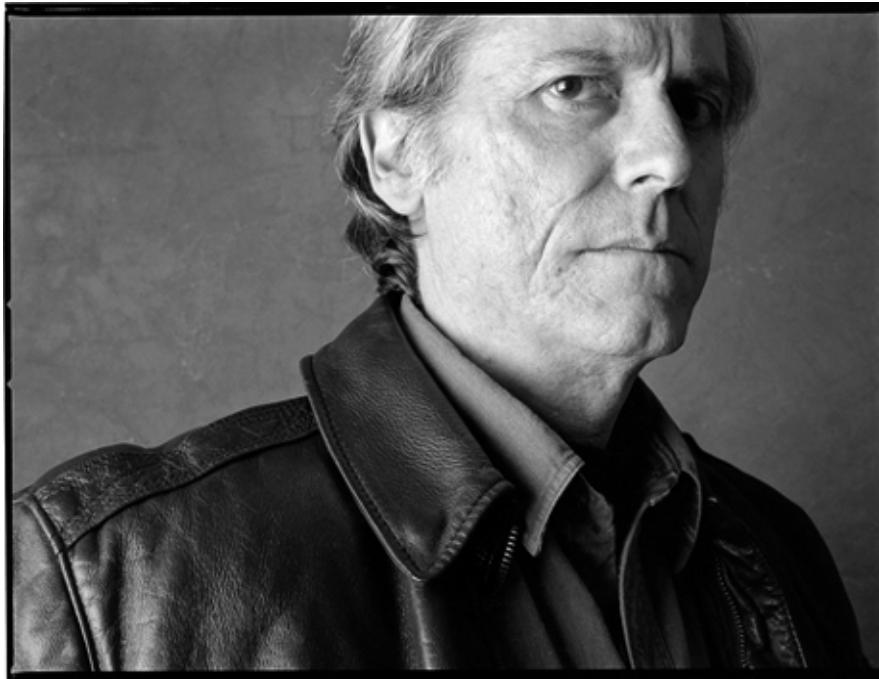
³⁶ Don DeLillo, “Dangerous Don DeLillo,” interview by Vince Passaro, *The New York Times Magazine*, May 19, 1991, pp. 34-36, 38, 76-77. Rpt. in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, ed. Thomas DePietro, University Press of Mississippi, 2005, 76-77.

³⁷ Don DeLillo, “An Interview with Don DeLillo,” interview by Maria Nadotti, *Salmagundi* 100, Fall, 1993, pp. 86-97, trans. Peggy Boyers. Rpt. in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, ed. Thomas DePietro, University Press of Mississippi, 2005, 109.



Don DeLillo, Joyce Ravid (1988)

“He reads into the night. He sleeps in the armchair. There are times when he thinks he can’t go on. He feels disheartened, almost immobilized by his sense of the dead. The dead are in the room. And photographs of the dead work a mournful power on his mind. An old man’s mind. But he persists, he works on, he jots his notes. He knows he can’t get out. The case will haunt him to the end. Of course they’ve known it all along. That’s why they built this room for him, the room of growing old, the room of history and dreams.” — *Libra*, pg. 445



Don DeLillo, Michael O'Brien (1991)

“She felt the uneasy force, the strangeness of seeing a man who had lived in her mind for years as words alone—the force of a body in a room. She almost could not look at him.” — *Mao II*, pg. 35

interviewers and critics have tended to reify rather than challenge, making of him a seer and a prophet, an observer who stands always watching at a remove.

Whatever the case may ultimately be—whether I cede his status as a clerical and austere word-smith, or I challenge this interpretation by foregrounding his generosity and openness, or if, indeed, I posit no final state or status and I endure in the understanding of his textual multiplicity, the polysemy of his characteral meanings—whatever the case...I recently found myself agape as I watched a certain clip featuring DeLillo. Even as I recalled his graciousness toward intrusive fans and his oft-mentioned personal humor, I felt, simply, stunned. And my sense of confusion increased as the seconds counted away at the bottom of the viewing window. *What am I watching?* I thought. And anyone who feels keenly the mysterious gravity of this novelist might be surprised, as I was, by his appearance at The Library of Congress' 2013 National Book Festival.³⁸

II. Encountering Kitsch & Ethnic Origins

DeLillo came, I am led to understand, in order to accept the inaugural Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction. Yet from the opening minute of this video, it all seems, frankly, undignified—which is, of course, a stuck-up response. But considering the backdrop for the stage with its James Thurber-ish drawing of a smiling, barefoot girl on a tree-branch, engrossed in her pink polka-dotted book, a cartoon-yellow duck perusing the text over her shoulder, and a hedgehog lounging with his own book atop a *pile* of books, well, how am I to reconcile this childhood *kitsch* with the author whose titles are reeled off by the Librarian of Congress James Billington (“*Ratner’s Star, Players, Running Dog, The Gnomes,*” he says—or perhaps he says “*The*

³⁸ *Don DeLillo: 2013 National Book Festival*, perf. Don DeLillo and Marie Arana (The Library of Congress, 2014), The Library of Congress: Webcasts.

Nomes,” as the transcript has it), who has moreover been deemed a literary vandal and a bad citizen,³⁹ “the chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction,”⁴⁰ and “an artist of diffusion and dispersal, of implication and missing information.”⁴¹ The embarrassments only mount, though. From the ungainly handshake that DeLillo and Billington share, which is abruptly interrupted by the bestowal of a crystal award plaque, and DeLillo’s awkward-but-proud foisting of said plaque like a College Bowl Game-winner, to the embarrassingly mistimed head-nod and beckoning gesture he gives his interviewer as she comes on stage (not realizing, I suppose, that she, too, will be saying a few words at the podium) and the hesitant touch a bearded A/V techie gives DeLillo before hooking him up at the waist with a sound-system jack. It is by turns banal, mortifying, and, again, undignified. Dealing with his zealous readers, who insist on verifying the intellectual affinities they have noted in his work with direct assurances from the vaunted author, DeLillo is nevertheless insisting that, no, perhaps he did not have *Wittgenstein* by his side when he wrote *Ratner’s Star*. Here, however, there is no elite tradition to aver. There is simply a stage burdened with kitsch, an event not impeccably organized, and an unmistakably *démodé* venue.

And so I wondered: Couldn’t he have simply said “No”? “I’m not a recluse,” DeLillo admitted to the fiction editor of *The Washington Post*, “but there are things I do differently, things I avoid and invitations I turn down constantly.”⁴² Wasn’t this an invitation to turn down? Or if not to “turn down” then at least to confront with some variant of the unerringly dispassionate speech he gave at the 1985 National Book Awards: “I’m sorry I couldn’t be here tonight, but

³⁹ George F. Will, “*Libra*,” *The Washington Post*, September 22, 1988: A25.

⁴⁰ Robert Towers, “From the Grassy Knoll,” review of *Libra*, *The New York Review of Books* 35, no. 13 (August 18, 1988).

⁴¹ A. O. Scott, “In Search of the Best,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 2006, Sunday Book Review sec.

⁴² Ron Charles, “Novelist Don DeLillo Named First Recipient of Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction,” *The Washington Post*, April 25, 2013.

I thank you all for coming.”⁴³ I mulled over these thoughts, berating myself not infrequently for being an elitist prig, yet still perplexed. That is until, clicking around, I came across the novelist’s official response (or at least a part of it) upon being informed he was the recipient of the Library of Congress Prize. The Library’s press-release stated:

“ ‘When I received news of this award, my first thoughts were of my mother and father, who came to this country the hard way, as young people confronting a new language and culture,’ said DeLillo. ‘In a significant sense, the Library of Congress prize is the culmination of their efforts and a tribute to their memory.’ ”⁴⁴

With these few words, DeLillo points our way. Although he may have been unfair, John Paul Russo was not unwise when he advocated turning to the ethnic origins of DeLillo’s writings—and thus of his life. And these words makes sense—if I may be allowed to think his decision was not doctored by a savvy agent or leveraged by friendly coercions—of DeLillo’s appearance at that well-intentioned but inelegant Book Festival.

Listening, again, to his conversation with Marie Arana, I begin to hear things I hadn’t heard before. “As I got a little older,” he says, “it began to occur to me that this place in which I lived, which I could summarize as ‘The Italian Bronx’, might be a place worth writing about.”⁴⁵ Unlike any other literary prizes awarded this Bronx-native, the Library of Congress Award is given at the behest of a federal institution, indeed the oldest federal cultural institution in the

⁴³ Don DeLillo, “What Don DeLillo’s Books Tell Him,” interview by Alexandra Alter, *The Wall Street Journal*, January 30, 2010.

⁴⁴ Library of Congress, “Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction Awarded to Don DeLillo,” news release, Washington, 2013 (States News Service).

⁴⁵ *Don DeLillo: 2013 National Book Festival*.

United States, a symbol of the American commitment to knowledge and texts.⁴⁶ This is perhaps an American embrace, a challenge to and even a repeal of DeLillo's outsider status, an incorporation into the body politic of a man who once described himself as a "Bronx boy wondering why he is here." And I don't think it displeased him. *That* is why he could not and would not refuse the invitation. His story is the story of immigrants, particularly the two who became his parents. "Once I left home to live on my own in Manhattan," DeLillo recalls, "I realized that, at some level, I was repeating the journey that my parents took; that is, travelling from one culture to a completely different culture. And for them it worked. They came to this country for better lives and they found them." And with these "better lives," he suggests, they found America, as well. So his sojourn, too, is toward or within or in search of America. "And now what I wanted to do," DeLillo admits, "was to get out of those dark, narrow streets and find America, just as they had done."

By now, I reckon, DeLillo has found America or, at least, an essential aspect of it. America, however, has not yet found DeLillo. Despite the "incorporation" I spoke of above, we are still missing things. In particular—again, following John Paul Russo—religion and ethnicity. The two cannot be cleanly disentangled. I suspect this is why a spate of books and articles, published over the past decade, that sought to recover DeLillo's ethnicity is paralleled by a spate of books and articles on the subject of religion in the author's life and writings. As such, the ensuing reflections, which primarily attend to DeLillo's religious inheritances and preoccupations, also dwell on the ethnic identity that gives his style of Roman Catholicism its peculiar character.

⁴⁶ The American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, from which DeLillo received awards in 1984 and 2000, though federally chartered, boasts neither the age nor the prestige of the Library of Congress.

III. Identifying Catholic

In a 1982 interview with one of his long-standing interlocutors, Thomas LeClair, DeLillo observed that

Being raised as a Catholic was interesting because the ritual had elements of art to it and it prompted feelings that art sometimes draws out of us. I think I reacted to it the way I react today to theater. Sometimes it was awesome; sometimes it was funny. High funeral masses were a little of both, and they're among my warmest childhood memories.⁴⁷

This recollection of Catholicism situates it in terms of art. Ritual as a kind of art and the Mass as theatre are fairly common interpretations of the Catholic liturgy. Earlier DeLillo even comments that his interest is in “religion as a discipline and a spectacle.” In a very real sense, then, the initiatory encounter with art happened for DeLillo not between the pages of a book—*Ulysses* or *The Death of Virgil*—but at the Latin Mass of an Italian Catholic Church in New York City, an experience repeated over and over through the long days of childhood. And as he grew older from high school to university, these rites continued to be repeated in his life. When DeLillo told Vince Passaro, “I think there is a sense of last things in my work that probably comes from a Catholic childhood,” he hints at the lifelong influence of an early contact with Catholicism.⁴⁸

Using a phrase like “Catholic *childhood*,” however, establishes a distance in the author’s biographical life. DeLillo, here, introduces a separation between life lived roaming Morris Park as an Italian Catholic kid, in the heyday of boyhood, and the life of later years, whose character is not wholly defined—at least not for this interviewer—but nonetheless somehow different. The

⁴⁷ DePietro, *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, 10.

⁴⁸ DePietro, *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, 81.

distinction cannot be sustained. What could be called an end of the orthodox “religious” does not preclude an engagement with Catholicism of a different order. Despite the sense DeLillo gives (albeit unspoken) in many of his interviews that his Catholic faith is a matter of the past, there remains an unstinting dialogue in his writing with religiosity, belief, mysticism, and Christianity. And intriguingly, to what might be the inaugurating event of the post-secular in the realm of literature—the *fatwā* issued against Salman Rushdie following the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (1988)—DeLillo took a strong vocal and yet ambiguously Catholic stance.

As his advocacy for imprisoned writers like Liu Xiaobo and Wei Jingsheng⁴⁹ or his comments in “A History of the Writer Alone in a Room” reveal, DeLillo’s investment in the political safety of authors is profound and engaged. Yet Rushdie’s particular plight struck DeLillo to a greater degree than that of any other writer. At the suggestion of fellow author Paul Auster, DeLillo wrote a protest letter to acknowledge the fifth anniversary of Ayatollah Khomeini’s *fatwā* against Rushdie. This text Auster then had published as a lovingly designed brochure to be placed in books being sold on 14 February, the decree’s issue date. Expounding on the implications of Rushdie’s persecution, DeLillo wrote:

He [Rushdie] is alive, yes, but the principle of free expression, the democratic shout, is far less audible than it was five years ago — before the death edict tightened the binds between language and religious dogma.⁵⁰

For DeLillo, who once confirmed a link between *Mao II* and the “Rushdie Affair,”⁵¹ the themes that began to stir in his work at the end of the eighties were to have considerable impact on his

⁴⁹ Don DeLillo, “The Artist Naked in a Cage,” *The New Yorker* 73, no. 13 (May 26, 1997): 6-7.

⁵⁰ The University of Texas at Austin, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, “Don DeLillo’s Papers”. Box 91, Folder 91.6. “[Protest Letter, published form]”.

subsequent fiction. Crucially, the Ayatollah's *fatwā* was not simply a religious decree, but a political one as well, so that the intersections of politics and literature, religion and the task of writing, terrorism and creativity, came unsurprisingly to serve as primary dilemmas in *Mao II*, *Underworld*, "In the Ruins of the Future", *Falling Man*, and *Point Omega*. And yet DeLillo's first public response to the *fatwā* came not via the publication of his protest letter. It came in the form of a signature he contributed to a group letter to the *New York Times*.

A letter to the editor in *The New York Times*, entitled "Rushdie Novel Stirs Passions East and West; Answer to the Cardinal," published 26 February, 1989—signed by "writers, of widely varying Roman Catholic backgrounds"—bore the signature of Don DeLillo.⁵² Castigating Cardinal John O'Connor for his criticism of *The Satanic Verses* and his call to Catholics to recognize "the affront it poses to believers of Islam," the text of the letter declares: "Mature Catholics do not believe that any dialogue with the non-Christian world can be conducted within a system that prejudices books. Mature Catholics do not believe that a death threat can be met with ambiguity." Speaking, ostensibly, in the voice of "Mature Catholics," the undersigned signaled their investment in at least some kind of Catholic identity. This does not by any means demand a religious investment. The authors and intellectuals Mary Gordon, Andrew Greeley, John Guare, Maureen Howard, and Gary Wills, among others, who were DeLillo's co-signers, hailed from "widely varying Roman Catholic backgrounds," as the letter asserts. For example, Gordon considers herself a "religious" Catholic and Greeley was a controversially idiosyncratic Catholic priest; on the other hand, Guare is a "lapsed Catholic" and Howard has referred to herself by the same term; and Wills, who entered and then left a Jesuit seminary, is by some standards a "devout" Catholic, yet one whose criticisms and unorthodox perspectives on Church doctrine have made him a pari-

⁵¹ Lorrie Moore, "Look for a Writer and Find a Terrorist," *New York Times Book Review* 140, no. 4862 (1991), 7.

⁵² Don DeLillo et al., "Rushdie Novel Stirs Passions East and West; Answer to the Cardinal," *New York Times*, February 26, 1989, 22.

ah in many circles. In other words, DeLillo's stake in the vagaries of so-called Catholic identity—made evident here by a simple signature—need not place him in a “religious” sphere.

Lately, however, DeLillo has been pressed by critics and interviewers to reveal something of his religious affiliations. In a conversation with Alexandra Alter about *Point Omega*, DeLillo admitted that his Catholic upbringing “has an effect” on his work “in ways I can't be specific about—the sense of ceremony, the sense of last things, and the sense of religion as almost at times an art.”⁵³ These are insights available to anyone paying attention back in 1982, when Thomas LeClair interviewed DeLillo. But the entire edifice upon which a question like the one Maria Moss asked DeLillo in 1999, “Are you a spiritual person?,”⁵⁴ fails to engage the characteristically Catholic heritage from which he hails. Moss' question, prompted by DeLillo's comments on the “aspect of religion in *Underworld*,” bluntly seeks an answer found in categories of faith, adherence, religion, spirituality, and other similar designations. She does not press into the nature of Catholicism, specifically, as a cultural and social inheritance.

In *Catholics in New York: Society, Culture, and Politics 1808-1946*, Terry Golway considers what it is that “makes” a Catholic in New York: “Surely one characteristic seems obvious: Catholics in New York have been and are, well, *Catholics*.” Following through on that statement, self-evident though it is, Golway insists that they might have been converts, “retired Catholics,” or dissenters from Church policy,

⁵³ DeLillo, “What Don DeLillo's Books Tell Him.”

⁵⁴ DePietro, *Conversations*, 158.

But whatever their status, whatever their political views, wherever they were born, however early or late they were received into the Church, Catholics in New York shared and continue to share a common heritage of faith.⁵⁵

Something quite secular appears to haunt Catholicism in this account. There are worldviews, cultures, languages, traditions that can arise, Golway seems to suggest, and then be disconnected from the body of dogmatic, or even heterodox but nonetheless *religious* belief. “Even for those Catholics who do not practice anymore, who have lost religious belief,” Pete Hamill writes, “there are ways to be Catholic.”⁵⁶ Especially for DeLillo, whose Italian immigrant family was almost certainly hostile toward American Church authority—as many neglected and ill-treated Italian immigrant families were—the notion of the hierarchical Church and its official, codified texts being the sole guarantors of Catholicism would have been fairly alien. Instead of daily Mass, priestly vocations, and donations to the largely German or Irish-Catholic parishes, Italian-Catholics made devotions to their Madonnas and saints, danced and cavorted in *festas* of the streets, came together as extended families, and shared home-cooked *pranzi* (banquets). Neither Catechism nor systematic theology defined the religion of these variously Neapolitan, Calabrese, Genoan, Abruzzese immigrants, but rather a *taste*, a *touch*, a *smell*, a *sound*, a *sight* of Italian-Catholic culture: “beans boiled in oil and red pepper, hot waffles, fried and sugared dough, boiled corn, ice cream, watermelon, sausage”⁵⁷; “Someone who had been healed—or hoped to be healed—by the Madonna of headaches or arthritis would carry wax models of the afflicted limbs

⁵⁵ Terry Golway, *Catholics in New York: Society, Culture, and Politics, 1808-1946* (New York: Fordham University Press; Museum of the City of New York, 2008), 14.

⁵⁶ Golway, *Catholics in New York*, 24.

⁵⁷ Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pg. 4.

or head, painted to make them look realistic”⁵⁸; “the whole colony had emptied into the thoroughfares, jostling, guff-awing, shouting, shuffling back and forth”⁵⁹; “It was a solemn moment; the voice of the bell seemed more vibrant and sonorous on this night. The sound touched every home in Italian Harlem.”⁶⁰ Life on Arthur Avenue in the 1940s and 50s, as in any other predominately Italian-Catholic area of New York at that time, was a life of *sensations*, where the half-artless flirtations of young men and women mingled with the crowded prayers of street devotion—arms lifted, knees bent down to the warm gravel, as vendors circled the mass of worshippers and revelers, selling their wares of food and kitsch.

There are many tacks to take from the perspective of DeLillo’s biography—e.g. skepticism of the clergy, outsider identity, mass religious events, working-class vs. blue-collar environments—but it is this sense of Catholicism as a religion of sensation, as an embodied religion, that I would like to pursue, here. I will draw upon *White Noise* in this exploration.

IV. Catholic Bodies

“Ho un’infinita fame / d’amore,” Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote in 1962, “dell’amore di corpi senza anima.”⁶¹ The translation of these lines by Norman MacAfee and Luciano Martinengo reads: “I have an infinite / hunger for love, love of bodies without souls.”⁶² Within the context of this particular poem, “Prayer to My Mother,” Pasolini ascribes his “love of bodies without souls” to his mother’s total possession of “the soul.” Enslaved by this possession, Pasolini says, he cannot intermingle his own soul with the souls of his lovers: “For the soul is inside you, it is you...” he

⁵⁸ Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, 3.

⁵⁹ Silvano M. Tomasi, *Piety and Power: The Role of the Italian Parishes in the New York Metropolitan Area, 1880-1930* (Staten Island, N.Y.: Center for Migration Studies, 1975)

⁶⁰ Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, 1.

⁶¹ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Poems*, trans. Norman MacAfee and Luciano Martinengo (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), 108.

⁶² Pasolini, *Poems*, 109.

admits to his mother. Yet, viewed against the larger corpus of Pasolini's artistic production, this evacuation of the soul from the body arises repeatedly as a motif without reference to the figure of the mother. "Everyday life was itself sacred," Barth David Schwartz explains in *Pasolini Requiem*: "every person...was holy. He saw the scavengers and hustlers of the *Borgata* literally as 'fourteen-year-old Christs'."⁶³ As an Italian Marxist and as an atheist, Pasolini spoke the language of folk Catholicism without a view to its metaphysical or eschatological claims. Following the release of *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pasolini was asked at a televised round-table, "Is the Gospel a source of consolation for you?," to which he replied:

I completely reject the word "consolation." For me, the Gospel is a great intellectual work, a great edifice of thought. It doesn't console. It fills, integrates, regenerates, sets one's own thoughts in motion. But consolation? What use is consolation? "Consolation" is a word like "hope."⁶⁴

Yet alongside this rejection of "consolation" or "hope" in the Gospel, Pasolini could argue, as he did in 1949, that "the artist must not flee the world but must be 'in his work, more objective and more, let us say even this, Christian'."⁶⁵ In light of this, I understand Pasolini's "bodies without souls" to be, at least in part, the sacred "scavengers and hustlers of the *Borgata*," whom he sought to love with Christ-like passion yet without Christian hope. The body—material, en-fleshed, and finite—is treated with a compassion that, at one time, was reserved for the soul—eternal, ethereal, and unbodied.

⁶³ Barth David Schwartz, *Pasolini Requiem* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 235.

⁶⁴ *Via Pasolini* in *Pier Paolo Pasolini's Trilogy of Life* (4 discs), prod. Albert Grimaldi (Criterion Collection, 2012), DVD.

⁶⁵ Schwartz, *Pasolini Requiem*, 217.

This section begins with a brief interpretation of Pasolini's "corpi senza anima" because my intention is to pursue the idea of an immanentist and embodied Catholic understanding of human life in *White Noise*. More than this, Pasolini's Marxist approach to this immanent Catholic vision provides a useful counterfoil to the ethnic approach in DeLillo's novel. Whereas the former arose from the necessity within Marxist thought itself to address the "soul of the people," even and especially among "the outcasts to whom Christ ministered," the "*sottoproletariato*,"⁶⁶ which Pasolini found explicated in Gramsci's writings; the latter, I believe, stems from the indissolubility of ethnic and religious identity, a result of DeLillo's particular upbringing. It is this indissolubility that I will explore first.

The day after DeLillo was born, Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church—whose pews filled with members of the Arthur Avenue community, like the DeLillos, each Mass—celebrated the feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mount Carmel was established in 1906 to serve the needs of an impoverished Italian and Italian-American populace dissatisfied with extant German and Irish Catholic parishes. These established parishes made little attempt to incorporate or accommodate the influx of Italians that were pouring into New York City in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. "The immigrants and their clergy were looked upon with suspicion because they were poor and foreign," Silvano M. Tomasi observed. "An Irish pastor even remarked: 'Italian priests here must be servants'."⁶⁷ Mary Elizabeth Brown has demonstrated that "first-generation Italian parishes," like DeLillo's childhood Mount Carmel Church, "appeared to...help the Italians conserve...aspects of their culture by providing space in which to practice some of their rituals." "In the United States, the Italians lived among Catholic and non-Catholics who followed other customs, and so their parishes became centers for maintaining their

⁶⁶ Schwartz, *Pasolini Requiem*, 235.

⁶⁷ Tomasi, *Piety and Power*, 46.

particular rituals,” Brown wrote.⁶⁸ The ritual and parish divisions that separated Italian Catholics from their neighboring German or Irish co-religionists were, then, inextricably bound to the very social fact of their *being Italian*. Furthermore, in the predominately Italian Catholic neighborhood of Belmont, where DeLillo grew up, the *festas* of saints in the streets and the general atmosphere of shared religion that leaked into his daily life could only have increased for the young DeLillo his sense that ethno-social identity was precisely religious identity, and vice versa.

In addition to his parish affiliations, there is the matter of DeLillo’s educational attainments. DeLillo attended St. Martin of Tours grammar school,⁶⁹ and then from 1950 to 1954 Cardinal Hayes High School, a Catholic school established under the auspices of the conservative powerhouse Cardinal Francis Spellman and a hallmark of the Bronx educational system. According to Russo, during DeLillo’s years the school was administrated by Christian Brothers and Xaverian Brothers.⁷⁰ DeLillo then entered Fordham University (1954-1958) where he earned a degree in Communication Arts. Referring to Fordham, DeLillo has since styled himself “a provincial kid who went to the local college.”⁷¹ Consistent across all these schools and their administration by various religious groups and institutes is their Catholicism. More than this, each of these schools originally served the needs of a specifically Italian-Catholic segment of The Bronx, as DeLillo’s reference to Fordham as the “local college” ought to hint. The ethnically homogeneous Arthur Avenue of DeLillo’s youth thus reified its dominant religious ethos and aesthetics across social spaces, educational institutions, and parish boundaries. Ethnic identity and religious identi-

⁶⁸ Mary Elizabeth Brown, “Assimilation in New York City’s Italian Parishes,” in *New York Glory: Religion in the City*, ed. Tony Carnes and Anna Karpathakis (New York: New York University Press, 2001), pg. 115.

⁶⁹ Russo, *The Future without a Past*, 220.

⁷⁰ Russo, *The Future without a Past*, 220.

⁷¹ Don DeLillo, “I’m not trying to manipulate reality – this is what I see and hear,” interview by Robert McCrum, *The Guardian / The Observer*, August 7, 2010, guardian.co.uk.

ty in these circumstances are constitutive and constituted alike—one or another appearing predominant depending on the perspective taken.

It is this constitutive-constituted duality of DeLillo's ethno-religious identity that I believe underlies one of his defining traits as a writer, that is, the deployment of religious language in the description of otherwise quotidian or secular experience. The critic Paul Maltby has examined this trait in "The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo," where—on the basis of DeLillo's Romantic sensibility and his language of "visionary experience"—he concludes, quoting Tom LeClair: "DeLillo presses beyond the ironic, extracting from his initially satiric materials a sense of wonderment or mystery."⁷² Significantly, Maltby indicates that it is frequently in the context of non-religious, everyday, and even commercial events or circumstances that DeLillo's "Romantic appeals" break through. Critics like Maltby and Cornel Bonca⁷³ thus recognize the deployment of sacred-profane language in DeLillo's writings, though they figure its logic somewhat differently than I do. Indeed, I would argue that the implications of DeLillo's ethno-religious identity are important, here, because they allows us to move more easily from the linguistic realm to the characterizations and thematic concerns of his fiction as a whole. This multivalent identity makes room, I believe, for the notion of a religiosity without belief. This "religiosity without belief," as I will argue, recalls Pasolini's notion of "bodies without souls" in its immanent, embodied conceptualization of Catholicism.

"For all the novel's commentary, few critics speak of this scene in detail."⁷⁴ The novel is *White Noise*, and the scene to which Jesse Kavadlo refers appears in the last quarter of the text. The main character of *White Noise*, Jack Gladney, enters a hospital administrated by German

⁷² Paul Maltby, "The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo" (1996), in *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, by Don DeLillo, ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 512.

⁷³ Cornel Bonca, "Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: The Natural Language of the Species" (1996), in *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, by Don DeLillo, ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 456-79.

⁷⁴ Jesse Kavadlo, *Don DeLillo: Balance at the Edge of Belief* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 36.

nuns. He is dragging the man whom he has just shot. Jack, too, is wounded; shot in the wrist. Upon entering the hospital, he is taken to have his injuries treated by Sister Hermann Marie. Jack tries to entertain himself and the nun by reciting the little German he knows. “*Gut, besser, best,*” he says.⁷⁵ Finally, after staring at a picture of “Jack Kennedy holding hands with Pope John XXIII in heaven,” he asks Sister Hermann: “What does the Church say about heaven today? Is it still the old heaven, like that, in the sky?”⁷⁶ The nun, to Jack’s stupefaction, replies: “Do you think we are stupid?” What ensues over the next few pages is an argument between Jack and the nun over the necessity of belief, the requirement that a nun honestly believe “in all the traditional things,” as he puts it, like angels and saints, heaven and hell. But, to return briefly to Kavadlo’s observation, there is a dearth of commentary on this scene. Taking as a representative sample the “Critical Essays” in the Osteen-edited Viking Library edition of *White Noise*, only three of the seven essays reference the encounter between Jack and Sister Hermann.⁷⁷ More than this, none of these critics spend more than one paragraph discussing it.

Joseph Dewey, who gives the scene its (apparently) standard one-paragraph treatment in *Beyond Grief and Nothing*, calls Sister Hermann “an imposing and unforgiving nun who ministers without compassion or gentleness.”⁷⁸ There is no indication in the text of *White Noise* that Dewey’s description is accurate. “A smile appeared on her seamed face. I counted for her, pointed to objects and gave their names. She nodded happily, cleaning out the wound and wrapping the wrist in sterile pads.”⁷⁹ This is the only description of Sister Hermann’s actual treatment of Jack’s injury; she is efficient, even genial, and there is no palpable sense that she is uncom-
pas-

⁷⁵ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 317.

⁷⁶ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 317.

⁷⁷ These are the essays by Tom LeClair, John N. Duvall, and Cornel Bonca.

⁷⁸ Joseph Dewey, *Beyond Grief and Nothing: A Reading of Don DeLillo* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 89.

⁷⁹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 317.

sionate or rough with her patient. Undoubtedly, however, Dewey is not referring to Sister Hermann's physical ministry. "But you're a nun," Jack says during the argument. "Nuns believe these things. When we see a nun, it cheers us up, it's cute and amusing, being reminded that someone still believes in angels, in saints, all the traditional things." "You would have a head so dumb to believe this?" Sister Hermann replies. Indeed, her responses are wholly materialist, entirely pragmatic. Jack tries to articulate his argument in a number of ways, but he continues to insist that she *must* believe these "traditional things," and Sister Hermann, again and again, rebuffs him. "If we did not pretend to believe these things," she says, "the world would collapse."⁸⁰ It is from these discussions that Dewey draws his characterization. And the apparent paradox of a nun who doesn't believe stimulates other critics, as well. John Duvall, drawing on Baudrillard's *Simulations*, wrote: "At the Catholic hospital in the Germantown section of Iron City, where Jack takes Mink after both are shot, Jack discovers what amounts to SIMUFAITH."⁸¹ "One nun tells Jack, 'Our lives are no less serious than if we professed real faith, real belief', because the simulated belief serves the same structural function vis-à-vis the nonbeliever as actual belief."⁸² Duvall's analysis, although I consider it to be largely accurate, presupposes a certain troubled viewpoint. It is the same viewpoint that Dewey implicitly takes, that is, Jack's.

The fiercest aspect of Jack and Sister Hermann's argument centers around his contention that, as a nun, she needs to believe, she must believe. "It's not what I believe that counts," he says. "It's what you believe."⁸³ To bolster his argument, Jack points to the picture of Kennedy and the Pope: "Why are you a nun anyway? Why do you have that picture on the wall?" It is at

⁸⁰ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 318.

⁸¹ John N. Duvall, "The (Super)Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Mediation in DeLillo's *White Noise*" (1994), in *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, by Don DeLillo, ed. Mark Osteen (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1998), 442.

⁸² Duvall, "The (Super)Marketplace of Images," 442-3.

⁸³ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 318.

this point that Sister Hermann disturbs him most severely. “If we did not pretend to believe these things,” she tells him, “the world would collapse.” Jack then latches onto the word “pretend,” as does Duvall in his exposition of “SIMUFAITH.” But by placing the onus of critical interpretation on Sister Hermann, Jack’s participation is ignored. It is he, as Sister Hermann knows and demonstrates, that believes without believing. This was partly Tom LeClair’s point when he observed, “[Sister Hermann] undercuts any sentimental religious hope [Jack] may now have by saying that even she and her fellow nuns don’t believe; they only pretend to for the sake of secularists, like Jack, who need belief not to disappear from the world.”⁸⁴ Yet LeClair doesn’t go far enough. It is not only “hope” but belief—as well as the *need* for belief—that must be located in Jack. As Slavoj Žižek maintains: “Even when a subject mocks a certain belief, this in no way undermines the belief’s symbolic efficacy—the belief often continues to determine the subject’s activity. When we make fun of an attitude, the truth is often in this attitude, not in the distance we take towards it.”⁸⁵ And he observes further that “one does not believe oneself, but, relying on another ‘subject supposed to believe’, one can act as if one believes.”⁸⁶ In Jack’s case, he is allowed to act as if he disbelieves, and the “subject supposed to believe” is Sister Hermann. “You’re a nun,” he says: “Act like one.”⁸⁷ What he means is “Believe like one,” as the preceding argument ought to indicate, but his mix-up leads us to the crux of a misunderstanding which has been perpetuated by Jack and critics of *White Noise* alike.

Taking Dewey’s analysis of the encounter in *In a Dark Time* as his main example, but commenting more generally on “postmodernism’s sense of the rupture between signifier and sig-

⁸⁴ Tom LeClair, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 222; qtd in *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, by Don DeLillo, ed. by Mark Osteen, 442.

⁸⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 87.

⁸⁶ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 90-1.

⁸⁷ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 320.

nified”—under which auspices Duvall also resides—Kavadlo observed: “The nun becomes a simulated nun, an imitation nun, a nun in appearance only there to pretend, and a copy of what the nuns of the past represented.”⁸⁸ This evaluation of Sister Hermann and her role in *White Noise* does not satisfy Kavadlo, as it doesn’t satisfy me. And he urges the reader to see past this rupture of meaning. Of the nuns at the Catholic hospital he writes: “In their bodies, not beliefs, they are living emblems.” The Orthodox priest and theologian Pavel Florentsky commented that “For better or worse, the work of art is the center of an entire cluster of conditions, which alone make possible its existence as something artistic; outside of its constitutive conditions it *simply does not exist* as art.”⁸⁹ It seems to me that something akin to this insight undergirds Kavadlo’s suggestion that the nuns are “living emblems,” that their role must be recognized as “sacrament[al]” and not merely as a “matter of separating the word from the thing, the falseness and disappointment of simulation.”⁹⁰ Duvall and Dewey, like Jack, take “belief” to be a constitutive condition of religious life. For them, a nun does not exist as religious without this faith; she must be a simulation or an imitation. Instead, Kavadlo counters:

the nun knows that belief is not about the angels or the intangible and evil is not about painted devils—her role in the hospital is to repair bodies and comfort souls, not through belief, per se, as much as through her personal embodiment of sacred character and mystery, her *personification* of belief, if not belief itself.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Kavadlo, *Don DeLillo*, 36.

⁸⁹ Pavel Florentsky, “The Church Ritual as a Synthesis of the Arts” (1922), in *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. and comp. Nicoletta Misler, trans. Wendy R. Salmond (London: Reaktion, 2002), 106.

⁹⁰ Kavadlo, *Don DeLillo*, 36.

⁹¹ Kavadlo, *Don DeLillo*, 36.

In other words, Sister Hermann is attuned to the materiality of her ministry—bodies bleeding, contused, and lifeless—without having lost her religious touch or sense of sacramental duty.

It is telling, in this respect, that in response to Jack's retort, "You're a nun. Act like one," she says: "We take vows. Poverty, chastity, obedience. Serious vows. A serious life."⁹² And indeed her life appears to be more serious than Jack's for most of *White Noise*. Duvall or Dewey might glom onto the word "act" as an indication that Sister Hermann's life is "A piece of acting, a pretence; a display of exaggerated or feigned behavior."⁹³ I would argue, on the contrary, that it is more justly read as "Something done as an outward sign of a condition, state, or feeling."⁹⁴ The ambiguity of the "sign" still remains in this alternate definition of "act"; it leaves open the rupture of meaning that torments postmodern interpretations of *White Noise*. What Kavadlo pursues, though, is the idea of an "embodiment" that manifests in a series of acts. He doesn't foreclose or answer the problem of meaning; he relocates it. The nuns "are the word fleshed into action," he says. Sister Hermann *lives* her ministry, she does not peddle the "traditional things" which might interfere with her service to the wounded. "We are here to take care of sick and injured. Only this. You would talk of heaven, you must find another place."⁹⁵

As I suggested before beginning my analysis of Jack Gladney's encounter with Sister Hermann Marie in *White Noise*, I think one potential source of the immanent, embodied Catholicism that the nun evinces is DeLillo's ethno-religious identity. The foundation for my contention rests partly on DeLillo's total exposure to Italian Catholicism in familial, social, educational, and ritual spaces, which I explored in the third and fourth sections of this chapter. Indeed, religion and ethnicity, for the child of Italian immigrants living in The Little Italy of the Bronx, were cer-

⁹² DeLillo, *White Noise*, 320.

⁹³ "act, *n.*" II.12. OED Online. March 2014. Oxford University Press.

⁹⁴ "act, *n.*" I.2.c. OED Online. March 2014. Oxford University Press.

⁹⁵ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 318.

tain to undergo some intermixture. Claire Mitchell goes so far as to say, in “The Religious Content of Ethnic Identities,” that “religion often constitutes the fabric of identity.”⁹⁶ Mitchell offers a number of consequences of this notion:

Sometimes groups or individuals may use religious resources to boost ethnicity, and in many cases, this reactivates religious dimensions of identity. In these situations, identity becomes simultaneously informed by religious as well as ethnic content. In other cases, latent religion, or religion ‘once removed’, can be rekindled unconsciously by individuals in response to social and political changes. Sometimes religious ideas learned in childhood seem to make sense of situations in later life and can be called upon by individuals groping to understand themselves and their social relationships.⁹⁷

I believe that any of these three interrelated effects might be argued to have a bearing on DeLillo’s deployment of religious language, characters, and themes. And the very notion of DeLillo having an ethno-religious identity—combined, perhaps, with the Mitchell’s insights—might serve to explain the perplexing statement he made in 2010: “Religion has not been a major element in my work...”⁹⁸

At some level this statement rings true. His central characters are rock-stars, mathematicians, waste and risk analysts, performance artists, editors, even writers. They are not monks, priests, nuns, or theologians. Most of his characters don’t go to church, and if they do, they do so reluctantly. They are rather like the poet Philip Larkin’s churchgoer, who comes to the vacant

⁹⁶ Claire Mitchell, “The Religious Content of Ethnic Identities,” *Sociology* 40, no. 6 (2006): 1148.

⁹⁷ Mitchell, “The Religious Content of Ethnic Identities,” 1148.

⁹⁸ Don DeLillo, “An Interview with Don DeLillo,” interview by Antonio Aiello, PEN America, November 4, 2010, pen.org.

church in “Church Going” not for “superstition,” nor for a mid-day service. He stops out of curiosity and respect for “this ground, / which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in, / if only that so many dead lie round.” And yet on another level DeLillo’s statement rings false. Former cult members, irate, crazed converts, schmoozy priests, Islamist terrorists, night-beat officer-saints, faux Eastern mystics, and Sufi rappers are sprinkled throughout his novels and stories. They might be minor characters, side-characters, characters from less important works, secondary and tertiary characters, but they often give life to DeLillo’s fiction, infusing it with silliness, a sense of maybe-sacredness, a locus of critique. But even the main protagonists of DeLillo’s writings, though not often characterized as being outwardly religious, are often grappling with religious dilemmas, or even secular dilemmas, yet in the argot of grace, awe, vision, and ecstasy. So that it is difficult for me to reconcile his statement, “Religion has not been an important element in my work,” with the work as I find it. Yet there is more to the statement. To quote DeLillo in full: “The Latin mass had an odd glamour—all that mystery and tradition. Religion has not been a major element in my work, and for some years now I think the true American religion has been ‘the American People’.” In some ways this statement still resists an integration with the work as I understand it. Yet that caveat, “and for some years now I think the true American religion has been ‘the American People’,” and DeLillo’s opening remark on the “Latin mass,” suggest that “religion”—if held to be merely a matter of faith or belief—will remain an inadequate description of his engagement with the themes I recognize. Rather, it is with “the American People,” as he says, that he finds “the true American religion.” It is a people, a community, an ethnicity, a social identity that makes a true religion. So that while the “Latin mass” with all its “mystery and tradition” has an “odd glamour,” it is not alone constitutive of a true American religiosity. It is to a people and not a rite that we must turn.

Chapter 2: The Early Fiction and the Spiritual Sixties

I. Historicizing Religion

Printed across sixteen pages in the 1960 Winter issue of the literary magazine *Epoch*, a short story entitled “The River Jordan” lifted a twenty-three year old product of Catholic schooling into the world of published letters. DeLillo’s debut work of fiction revolves around the itinerant preacher Emil Burke, who ministers to the five-person congregation of the Psychic Church of the Crucified Christ. One day in the dismal life of Emil Burke takes the reader from scrawled graffiti on a bathroom stall to the wages of sin in a dive-bar. And during the intervening hours, Burke, his congregants, and the denizens of New York City are brought together by DeLillo and set to converse and relate about the diverse issues of religious life in the Sixties. Personal salvation, new religious movements, the marketplace or supermarket of religion, self-conscious syncretism, visions of God and mystical experience. These and other elements of spirituality and religiosity compose the themes and problems which “The River Jordan” addresses. And in this way DeLillo’s first short story points to one largely neglected approach to his work: religio-historical analysis.

To some readers, that statement will seem partially incorrect. Although the Italian Roman Catholic foundation of DeLillo’s vision has not, according to my sights, been fully addressed, “history” is practically an *idée mère* of the secondary literature.⁹⁹ Yet very few of the analyses of history in DeLillo’s work have been undertaken with the concept of the religio-historical I have

⁹⁹ See, e.g., Christopher M. Mott, “*Libra* and the Subject of History” (1994), in *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, ed. Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles (New York: G. K. Hall, 2000), 229-244; Molly Wallace, “‘Venerated Emblems’: DeLillo’s *Underworld* and the History-Commodity,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 42, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 367-83; Timothy Parrish, “History after Henry Adams and Ronald Reagan: Joan Didion’s *Democracy* and Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*,” in *From the Civil War to the Apocalypse: Postmodern History and American Fiction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 193-231.

in mind. In the main, it seems, there are two approaches to the subject of history. The first approach interprets DeLillo's own formulations, trying to come to terms with the type and philosophy of history being deployed in the fiction and in essays like "The Power of History" (1997) or "A History of the Writer Alone in a Room" (1999). The second approach tends to explore the "evental" nature of historical moments (following the philosopher Alain Badiou's development of this term), exploring the constructions and ramifications of events like the Kennedy assassination or 9/11. My own intention, on the other hand, is strictly or "conservatively" historical. In other words, my aim is neither to "*reveal* in the retroaction of an interventional practice" the "conceptual construction" of "the event,"¹⁰⁰ nor to delineate the articulation of history particular to DeLillo's fictions and ruminations. Instead, my aim is to document some of the events, movements, and trends with religious or spiritual significance that were contemporaneous with DeLillo's upbringing and schooling and the early budding of his literary talent.

I will take as my guide three stories from the beginning of his career: "The River Jordan" (1960), "Take the 'A' Train" (1962), and "In the Men's Room of the Sixteenth Century" (1971). My overarching argument is that a movement may be mapped onto the early fiction that reflects the preoccupations of a thoroughly Catholic young man—as described in Chapter 1—whose interaction with the religious ferment and excess of the Sixties, in terms of his own Catholic tradition and the Christian tradition more widely, necessitated a gradual withdrawal into objective, analytic distance from religion as such. In addition, as I analyze each story, I will construct something like a speculative history. In other words, through these stories I seek to chart a few possibilities of influence and affiliation which arise in the religio-historical purview. I say "speculative" because my aim is not to argue for definitive intersections between the history and the stories I analyze; rather, it is to lay the groundwork for a deep historical contextualization which

¹⁰⁰ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 178.

would find its primary materials in the DeLillo Archives at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas. As both literary analysis and historical interpretation, the results of this chapter will necessarily be lopsided, yet I hope to bring forward some of the neglected aspects of DeLillo's literary output through this speculative approach.

II. The Critical Literature

In one of the only religio-historical approaches to DeLillo and his fiction, "Don DeLillo's Latin Mass" (2006) (later reworked as the third chapter of *Postmodern Belief* [2010]), Amy Hungerford begins by insisting on the fundamental importance of DeLillo's Italian Catholicism to his work as a novelist. She goes on to tease out some of the consequences of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) on that occupation.¹⁰¹ Hungerford's primary aim in the essay is to explore the Catholic culture of the 1950s (especially as manifested in New York City) and the impact of the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council on DeLillo's artistic response to his childhood religion. Yet by connecting what may be termed DeLillo's "Catholic Years" directly to his fiction—with only the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council and the election of John F. Kennedy intervening—Hungerford's account of the religio-historical dimensions of DeLillo's literary pursuits leaves largely open for interpretation thirteen years (from his graduation from Fordham University in 1958 to the publication of his first novel *Americana* in 1971) that contain the whole decade of the 60s and DeLillo's first five pieces of published fiction. Other critics, like Joseph Dewey, Robert Kohn, Mark Osteen, and John A. McClure, have been inclined to write about DeLillo and the religious elements of his work from what might be called a "Sixties" perspective (drawing for this designation from some of the themes of Sixties spirituality that Robert S. Ellwood has noted in *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening* [1994]). Robert Kohn, for instance, ar-

¹⁰¹ Amy Hungerford, "Don DeLillo's Latin Mass," *Contemporary Literature* 47, no. 3 (2006): 343-80.

gues persuasively that DeLillo had read W. Y. Evans-Wentz's translation of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, which became wildly popular in the sixties.¹⁰² McClure, in turn, has insisted that early novels like *Great Jones Street* (1973) and *Running Dog* (1978) need to be read in relation to pivotal works on Eastern religion and mysticism that appeared in the sixties and seventies.¹⁰³

With Hungerford's exploration of Catholic culture, the Second Vatican Council, and the Kennedy election, and with Kohn and McClure's insistence on the importance of D. T. Suzuki and the Tibetan Book of the Dead in DeLillo's fiction, the religio-historical approach to DeLillo's fiction has certainly begun to be fleshed-out. Yet lacunae remain. In the first place, the almost total absence of the impact of political events in the American landscape (excepting the Kennedy election) like the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 and the Supreme Court case *Abington vs. Schemp* (1963). Second, the importance of authors like Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, Paul Tillich, and Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose influence during DeLillo's formative years and during those years in which he began seriously writing and publishing are attested by reference in interviews and by inference from the literature DeLillo held in high esteem, like William Gaddis' Campbellian epic *The Recognitions* (1955). Third, DeLillo's interaction with the visual arts and film of these decades, specifically the spiritually and religiously inflected work of Jackson Pollock, Ingmar Bergman, Martin Scorsese, and Andy Warhol.

To put it succinctly: the American *religionslandschaft* changed dramatically after 1960.

Buddhists from Southeast Asia, Sikhs, Jains, and Hindus from South Asia, and Muslims from the Middle East brought their religions with them to the New World and, in so do-

¹⁰² Robert E. Kohn, "Tibetan Buddhism in Don DeLillo's Novels: The Street, The Word and The Soul," *College Literature* 38, no. 4 (2011): 156-80.

¹⁰³ John McClure et al., "Don DeLillo and Religion Roundtable," proceedings of American Literature Association Conference, Boston, MA.

ing, reshaped the religious landscape of America. Sikh *gurdwáras* (temples), Buddhist and Hindu temples. Shinto shrines, and Muslim mosques cropped up alongside of churches, synagogues, and Mormon temples. Vodou and Santería shrines became commonplace in certain neighborhoods of Miami, New Orleans, and New York City¹⁰⁴

As this passage from *Religion in American Life* suggests, DeLillo would have been in a prime location to witness the burgeoning of religious diversity in the Sixties. Then, from a political angle, Kennedy's election altered the perception and reception of Catholic-Americans at the same time it dramatized possible tensions of Church and State in the United States. With a similar valence, the Supreme Court case *Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963) allowed the non-confessional study of religion in public schools while simultaneously declaring unconstitutional the mandatory prayers or Bible readings that Abington, Pennsylvania and other cities had allowed in their schools. In still other quarters, the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 repealed the quota-system that had until then regulated the number of immigrants from each country permitted to enter the United States in a given year. Hart-Cellar opened American ports and cities to an influx of South Asian, African, and Middle Eastern immigrants, many of whom brought religious traditions to the states that had never been seen by the typical American. Even the Cold War could be taken as a factor in the increasing presence of religion in American culture, since political discourse and policy pitted atheistic communists against a "good" and presumably Christian democratic citizenship. Russell McCutcheon wonders whether or not the Cold War might have been one of "the necessary pre-conditions for establishing the Humanistic study of religion as a legit-

¹⁰⁴ Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Herbert Balmer, *Religion in American Life: A Short History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 439-40.

imate academic pursuit.”¹⁰⁵ However, the study of religion as it is known in the university today, i.e. “Religious Studies,” was a product of the 1960s in more ways than one. The influence of Romanian scholar and intellectual Mircea Eliade on the evolution, popularization, and academic legitimization of Religious Studies—from the time of his hiring at the University of Chicago in 1956 to his death thirty years later—is inestimable. But the influence Eliade wielded on discussion of religion in the United States extended beyond academic enclaves. *Myth of the Eternal Return* alone, Eliade’s first commercial success with English-language audiences, sold over 100,000 copies under a series of different titles and in several editions following its publication in 1954. Yet the role Eliade had in populating university departments from the 1960s onwards with professors and program directors for new-founded Religious Studies departments (supplied as they were by an ever-increasing pool of his former students) may one day be recognized as his more lasting legacy. And Eliade was not the only prominent figure dealing with or involved in the spread of religious thought at this time. The German-American philosopher and Christian theologian Paul Tillich, whose popular readership had trebled after the publication of *The Courage to Be* (1953) and *The Dynamics of Faith* (1957), appears to have been carried by the cultural tide since, according to Eric Ziolkowski, he “turn[ed] his full attention to Christianity’s ‘encounter with world religions’ only late in his life. His four lectures on that subject were given at Columbia in the fall of 1961, and published two years later, the year of his death (1963).”¹⁰⁶ Ziolkowski notes that Tillich delivered those lectures after

¹⁰⁵ Russell T. McCutcheon, “‘Just Follow the Money’: The Cold War, the Humanistic Study of Religion, and the Fallacy of Insufficient Cynicism,” *Culture and Religion* 5, no. 1 (2004): 46.

¹⁰⁶ Eric Jozef Ziolkowski, “The Contrapuntal Venture of Anthony C. Yu: The Comparative Study of Literature and Religion,” in *Literature, Religion, and East/West Comparison: Essays in Honor of Anthony C. Yu*, ed. Eric Jozef Ziolkowski (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 12.

his first and only trip to East Asia, to Japan, in May-July 1960, where he was exposed existentially for the first time to Buddhism and Shinto....The experience had so smitten him, that upon his return he avowed that his whole theological system would have to be reformulated to accord with his new perception of the Eastern world, and to correct his “Western provincialism.”¹⁰⁷

Tillich’s widespread popularity certainly meant that these final lectures and writings would find a readership, one augmented, too, by those aforementioned cultural and political shifts towards a more pluralistic, variegated, and visible American *religionslandschaft*.

While not all of these aspects of the *religionslandschaft* of the American sixties can be addressed in this chapter, I aim to further the religio-historical approach to DeLillo criticism that has been pioneered by Hungerford, Dewey, and McClure against critical practices that overvalue a de-historicized text and an author without biography, and which, simultaneously, tend to ignore the religious dimensions of DeLillo’s texts. Whereas in my first chapter I leveled my critical gaze at DeLillo’s biography and early social milieu and the resultant consequences of his Italian Catholic upbringing in the Belmont borough of the Bronx on his approach to writing and his choice of subject matter, in this chapter I intend to zoom out and analyze those religio-historical events of the American landscape that would have affected the adult DeLillo and the fruits of his first literary efforts.

¹⁰⁷ Ziolkowski, “The Contrapuntal Venture of Anthony C. Yu,” 12-3.

III. “The River Jordan”

The central character of “The River Jordan” is a seventy year old preacher named Emil Burke.¹⁰⁸ As I remarked at the opening of this chapter, he presides over The Psychic Church of the Crucified Christ. The crux of the story’s plot is the sermon Burke intends to preach at the New York Public Library. In the first half of “The River Jordan,” DeLillo introduces the reader to Burke as he is preparing for his sermon and reflecting on his life and mission. The next quarter of the story is an account of the sermon and its bathetic reception. Finally, the last quarter of “The River Jordan” depicts Burke’s defensive and forlorn response to the failure of his sermon to gather new followers. On the final page of “The River Jordan,” he assaults a former congregant and berates the patrons of a bar. Foul and crazed, Burke urges an irate bartender to attack him, hoping to be martyred. When the bartender refuses and tells Burke to leave, he is left transfixed by sorrow: “watching the mirror, seeing the old gaunt face, unmarked by pain, he tried to visualize a crown of thorns upon his head.”¹⁰⁹ Burke’s condition at the end of “The River Jordan,” with his earnest yet equally self-aggrandizing nature, could be limned with a line from John Donne’s “A Litany”: “for O, to some / Not to be martyrs, is a martyrdom.”

It must be remarked that Burke is as a tremendously sad character. DeLillo suspends our full realization of this point for the first few scenes of the story, allowing it to brood somewhat, though even at the beginning a palpable bleakness cannot be mistaken: “His wife lay next to him, eyes closed, face stale as parchment—a single touch and it would crumble.”¹¹⁰ DeLillo, however, leaves the full intensity of Burke’s sorrow in abeyance until later in the story in order to unleash it more powerfully. By the end, his dolorous wounds are left gaping to our sight. And so, too, is the intensity that informs his desire for martyrdom and his eagerness to do the work of spiritual

¹⁰⁸ Donald R. DeLillo, “The River Jordan,” *Epoch* 10, no. 2 (Winter 1960): 105-120.

¹⁰⁹ DeLillo, “The River Jordan,” 120.

¹¹⁰ DeLillo, “The River Jordan,” 105.

salvation. In the bar where Burke talks to the former congregant of his church, DeLillo articulates the preacher's turmoil:

He raised his fist and cracked it sharply on the table. Sin was all around him; it must be destroyed. Sin was Mr. McAndrew, money-lender, false patron; it was the pervert, a peddler of degeneracy; it was the young man and woman, slaves of concupiscence. It must be destroyed. And to kill sin we must be killed. This was the essence of the Three: Passion, Death, Resurrection: God, the Christ, the Spirit. He would kill sin and in death, like Christ, be remembered."¹¹¹

For all his moralizing fervor, however, Burke appears neither in the garb of an evangelical nor a fundamentalist. His rhetoric and self-presentation are closer to the spiritual counterculture of the 1960s. The name of the church alone signals Burke's proclivities: *Psychic Church of the Crucified Christ*. It lodges somewhere between the New Age and the Catholic. Moreover, his congregants are themselves a decidedly odd bunch. Mr. McAndrew, for instance, was born a Catholic but has rejected that heritage, and claims to be the auditor of "mystic voices." At the end of "The River Jordan" these voices compel him to move from Burke's church to the church of the One True Voodoo of Astral Consciousness. Another congregant, named Vincent, born a Jehovah's witness, says he is "shop[ing] around for a new faith."¹¹² And in a scene where Burke is speaking to his wife, his frames of reference range from St. Peter to Buddha to Gandhi.

Burke's intensity, however, derives from being haunted by sin. "There is no end to it," he thinks. "And no beginning. Sin is a circle, a roundness of dark, boundless desire. Sin is the in-

¹¹¹ DeLillo, "The River Jordan," 119-120.

¹¹² DeLillo, "The River Jordan," 109.

nermost feeling—an unfeeling domination of spirit by sense.”¹¹³ Here, I believe, his Catholic inheritance resides. This sin-hauntedness arises, for example, in the writings of other Catholics like Flannery O’Connor, Graham Green, and Evelyn Waugh. Julia’s notorious ruminations on sin in *Brideshead Revisited* are a case in point:

Past and future; the years when I was trying to be a good wife, in the cigar smoke, while time crept on and the counters clicked on the backgammon board, and the man who was ‘dummy’ at the men’s table filled the glasses; when I was trying to bear his child, torn in pieces by something already dead; putting him away, forgetting him, finding you, the past two years with you, all the future with you, all the future with or without you, war coming, world ending—sin.¹¹⁴

Although for many reasons Burke remains too heterodox to be classified as a Catholic, DeLillo’s near caricature of sin-hauntedness gives the character a certain Catholic valence.

Commenting on the Spiritual Sixties, Rober Ellwood observed that “one facet of the Sixties spirit...seemed to want to make religion a refuge from homogenization.”¹¹⁵ The Psychic Church of the Crucified Christ is exactly such a bastion of heterogeneity. “Local prayer groups, meditation groups, charismatic groups, religious social action groups, and house churches, not to mention new and independent religions, sprang up alongside the standard brands,” Ellwood says. Burke’s ministry could well be placed at the intersection of these categories. DeLillo, too—who’d been living in The Bronx but had either already or would soon move to Manhattan—was

¹¹³ DeLillo, “The River Jordan,” 119.

¹¹⁴ Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2008), 287.

¹¹⁵ Robert S. Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 56.

in a privileged position to witness an explosion of religious and spiritual communities and organizations, not least because of the variety of ethnic-immigrant communities to be found in New York. At the same time, this very heterogeneity anti-climactically dissolves Burke's church; the congregants all go off to find new faiths and other churches. And this, too—as Ellwood reminds us—was fairly common among unorganized religious enclaves. But, even so, as the heart and mind of the church Burke himself remains committed. According to Ellwood's conception, someone like Burke would be one of the many “independent seekers” of the 1960s.¹¹⁶ “[T]he Psychic Church was extinct; it served no purpose. And in order to save souls, to change the world, he would have no choice but to transcend his church, eclipse his own creation.”¹¹⁷ Thus Burke continues his salvation efforts alone, almost to the point of being murdered.

This acceptance of “independence,” a refusal to relinquish his mission to the limitations of established church or congregation, serves also to clarify the individualistic character of Burke's religiosity. “The River Jordan” is not about the seekers who come to be baptized; there are none. It is, instead, about a modern-day, possibly deranged, John the Baptist, who is alone and alienated in his ministry. “Perhaps all of them were mad. If so, he thought, it was a rational madness, for nothing is more sane than the saving of a soul; if they were mad, then Jesus, too, who was and is and is to come, then He, too, was a madman.” Whether or not Burke is a genuine madman, it is his vigilant individualism, his aggressive independence which estranges him from congregants, New Yorkers, and his wife alike. Burke's predecessor, John the Baptist, told the people that the “one who is more powerful than I is coming after me” (Mark 1:7). Burke, on the other hand, identifies *himself* with Christ: “he had saved her, and he thought: in this way did the

¹¹⁶ Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening*, 54.

¹¹⁷ DeLillo, “The River Jordan,” 117.

Lord Jesus save Magdalen.”¹¹⁸ His frosty dismissal of the church he founded, alongside his refusal to engage with the vital, ribald spirit of the crowd that gathers to hear his sermon at the Public Library, signal Burke’s failure to reconcile with community. And it is precisely a retreat from community and sociality, although evidently necessary, which begins DeLillo’s “Take the ‘A’ Train”.

IV. “Take the ‘A’ Train”

“Take the ‘A’ Train,” published in 1962, centers around a man named Angelo Cavallo, who decides to live and sleep on the subway in order to escape his loan-sharks.¹¹⁹ Due to its cerebral, inward-looking nature, “Take the ‘A’ Train” is the text most difficult to reconcile with an historical literary criticism; it runs counter, for instance, to many of the trends Ellwood charts in *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening*. While “The River Jordan” contained many characters, and its central character sought to save the souls of New York City passers-by, “Take the ‘A’ Train” is concerned with a single human being and the solitary investigation of memory. And for these reasons, although “Take the ‘A’ Train” is at times intensely religious, Angelo’s story is quite distinct from Emil Burke’s. Tellingly, the final episode of the story takes place on Sunday, on the third day of Angelo’s descent into the subway. In other words, “Take the ‘A’ Train” is also a resurrection narrative. To put it as Angelo thinks it: “Sunday: the end of the world.”¹²⁰

The first explicit entrance of religion into the text—in this case Italian Roman Catholicism—occurs during one of Angelo’s reveries about his family and upbringing:

¹¹⁸ DeLillo, “The River Jordan,” 112.

¹¹⁹ Donald DeLillo, “Take the ‘A’ Train,” *Epoch* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1962): 9-25.

¹²⁰ DeLillo, “Take the ‘A’ Train,” 24.

his first time in church he slipped beneath his mother's black dress that smelled like an old stale sofa, clutching her mighty calves while apocalyptic Italian women recited the rosary, the voices pessimistic as stained glass; feeling the pulse of his father's hands on his chest as he lay hot with scarlet fever, he heard the life-force in that proud Sicilian voice: "My blood is yours, my little son Angelo. My strength is your strength. I send forth life into your body. Feel it fill you with my own manhood. Feel it, Angelo. Breathe it in, figlio mio. It is yours. I give it to you. You are my son." How do you forget the man who is your father? How many nights, deep within the shipwreck of sleep, does he appear, like Christ, with blood upon his carpenter's hands."¹²¹

Aside from the obvious centrality of the father-figure in this story, it ought to be noted also that "Take the 'A' Train" is closer to home for DeLillo than "The River Jordan". As was discussed in Chapter 1, DeLillo's own background was Italian Roman Catholic. Moreover, his parents were, like Angelo's, first-generation immigrants, and his schooling was Catholic, as was Angelo's grammar schooling. John Paul Russo suggests that "In his exploration of diverse religious paths or his own religious origins, DeLillo does not differ from other postmodern writers who...have reflectively engaged, if not embraced, the religious revival of the past half-century."¹²² With "Take the 'A' Train" we are clearly in the domain of "religious origins," and whereas the intensity of Emil Burke's proselytizing Christian zeal is projected onto sinners and potential converts outside in the world, for Angelo the Italian Catholic paradigms regarding human dignity, death, and filial piety are wholly interior in their evocation.

¹²¹ DeLillo, "Take the 'A' Train," 17-8.

¹²² Russo, *The Future without a Past*, 215.

Describing the tenor of Christianity—in its mainline Protestant and Catholic versions alike—only a few of years later, Ellwood remarked that “[w]hat distinguished the Sixties case was that...the church’s weekday holiness was to be not only individualistic but corporate.”¹²³ And he says further that this “holiness” “was not only to be charitable but to agitate for radical change in structures.” But neither the word “corporate,” nor the phrase “radical change in structures” appear to be at all what is at stake in “Take the ‘A’ Train”. Indeed, it is clear that despite being published in a time of palpable ferment for religious social action, DeLillo’s story is—as he has Angelo think at one point—“[w]ithin the clockbeat of some *personal* midnight.”¹²⁴ This personal focus, in contrast to the communal-religious tenor of the Sixties more generally, is significant. From one perspective, it indicates the limitations of reading the historical contexts of a Catholic American with a text like *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening*, which favors the mainline Protestant narrative of Sixties history. Yet from another perspective—if we acknowledge, for instance, the influence of Dorothy Day’s community-oriented, social justice-advocating Catholic Worker Movement on Catholic immigrants—DeLillo’s anti-communal bias in “Take the ‘A’ Train” and “The River Jordan” takes on a potentially personal and stylistic hue. However, DeLillo himself makes an about-face on this personal inwardness and darkness at the end of the story.

In the final paragraph of “Take the ‘A’ Train,” Angelo mistakenly gets onto an elevated line during his routine circulation of underworld subways. When his car emerges from the depths of the rail-system and the light of day lances in through the windows—something shatters:

¹²³ Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening*, 147.

¹²⁴ DeLillo, “Take the ‘A’ Train,” 21 (my emphasis).

He ran through the train, toward the rear, from car to car, an immemorial desolate shriek unbending in his chest. As he ran, his right arm was stretched forth, high in the air. The hand was open, fingers straining, as though he were trying to seize one final handful of a darkness black as the universe.¹²⁵

The previous paragraph of “Take the ‘A’ Train” is given over entirely to frantic thoughts concerning God, God’s relation to human beings, God’s omniscience, and human mortality. In this context the “handful of darkness” for which Angelo desperately reaches might recall Burke’s meditations on the “dark, boundless desire” of sin. Although, on the surface, Angelo is struggling with loneliness, his ruminations on that loneliness nevertheless evoke Burke’s thoughts on sin. “There is no beginning to it, [Angelo] thought. And no end. Being born is the beginning. And the end is death, hell, eternity, pain, alone, forever, nothing. Alone.”¹²⁶ From a historical perspective, too, the “final handful of darkness” may also be understood—at least, in part—as the solemn, guilt-laden, archaic Catholicism of a certain sensibility that begins to be broken apart during the Sixties. Moreover, this exposure of the “infinities of circles within the soul” to the light of day is also an exposure to the world in all its banality, as DeLillo directs us to catch sight of Yankee Stadium along with Angelo: “He got up and looked out the window. There was Yankee Stadium, the upper deck, a million white shirts, speck upon speck.”¹²⁷ And this is without even taking into account the specter of Vatican II—which had begun preparation in 1959—the confrontation of the Catholic Church with an insistent modernity had already begun to alter the life and faith of Catholics, especially in the United States. Citing David J. O’Brien, Thomas J. Sugrue writes,

¹²⁵ DeLillo, “Take the ‘A’ Train,” 25.

¹²⁶ DeLillo, “Take the ‘A’ Train,” 19.

¹²⁷ DeLillo, “Take the ‘A’ Train,” 25.

“‘If there had never been a Second Vatican Council’...the erosion of Catholic communities...‘would [nevertheless] have created enormous pressure for change.’”¹²⁸

“Take the ‘A’ Train” begins at the moment of Angelo’s descent into the subway system; it ends with an exposure to daylight and the sight of a staple of the New York City landscape. This conclusion leads us to the last story of this chapter, “In the Men’s Room of the Sixteenth Century,” where the wages of sin and death are externalized on the streets and nightscape of New York City.

V. “In the Men’s Room of the Sixteenth Century”

“It was the anniversary of the beheading of St. Thomas More, an incandescent night in Times Square, all manner of humanity engaged in vintage decadence.” So begins what is arguably DeLillo’s most baroque piece of fiction.¹²⁹ Published in 1971 in *Esquire*, a few months after the publication of *Americana*, “In the Men’s Room of the Sixteenth Century” reaches back to “The River Jordan” and “Take the ‘A’ Train” in its focus on the intensities of religious experience, yet parallels *Americana* in its distanced tone and more analytic remove. At the level of plot description, “In the Men’s Room” charts the night-time sojourn of a police officer, Thomas Patrick Guffey, who dresses in drag and goes out into the streets of New York City as Lady Madonna.

Guffey is called, on a number of occasions, a “saint” by the derelicts and lunatics that pepper this story. And as he wanders around, handing out copies of the “*Metaphysical Disputations* of Suárez” to spiritual junkies,¹³⁰ calming frenzied and embattled gypsy women,¹³¹ and

¹²⁸ Thomas J. Sugrue, “The Catholic Encounter with the 1960s,” in *Catholics in the American Century: Recasting Narratives of U.S. History*, ed. R. Scott, Appleby and Kathleen Sprows Cummings (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 68.

¹²⁹ Don DeLillo, “In the Men’s Room of the Sixteenth Century,” *Esquire* (December 1971): 174-177, 243, 246.

¹³⁰ DeLillo, “In the Men’s Room,” 176.

¹³¹ DeLillo, “In the Men’s Room,” 177.

consoling the wounded in gutters with visions of “English pasture[s] of the mind,”¹³² the appellation seems well-deserved. Whereas Angelo Cavallo’s story of personal dereliction seems counter to the spirit of the Sixties with internalization of theology and ethno-religious culture, Guffey’s tale appears to be a narrativization of the concept of the “servant church.” The “servant church” and its attendant theological premises received their explicit elaboration during the Sixties, specifically through the work of theologians Harvey Cox and Gibson Winter. Ellwood, analyzing Harvey Cox’s masterwork in this tradition, *The Secular City* (1965), notes, “the Savior would now save his people as they went about their secular lives, on the streets and in schools, in the slums and city halls; Jesus would only seek or be sought through humanistic action in the world.”¹³³ And he says elsewhere: “the God of the servant church was definitively immanent, in and of the world.”¹³⁴ As these descriptions ought to indicate, the “servant church” model of (generally) high church Protestantism had its Catholic analogues in Day’s Catholic Worker Movement and the Liberation Theology movement in South America, whose founding articulation, Gustavo Gutiérrez’s *Teología de la liberación*, was also published in 1971.

And this “servant church” model seems to be the foundation of Lady Madonna’s ministry. Her precepts and language are Catholic Christian, but her aims, like those of Sister Hermann Marie in *White Noise*, are this-worldly, immediate. It is true, too, that the world to which she ministers is suffused with Catholic ideas and accoutrements. A mafia don, for instance, questions a potential employee on doctrinal matters with a book that Guffey notes “looked...very much like the Baltimore Catechism he had used in grade school.”¹³⁵ What joins Cavallo and Burke, that is, their intensely internal, socially alienating relationship to the Christian tradition, is exter-

¹³² DeLillo, “In the Men’s Room,” 177, 243.

¹³³ Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening*, 133.

¹³⁴ Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening*, 148.

¹³⁵ DeLillo, “In the Men’s Room,” 176.

nalized in “In the Men’s Room of the Sixteenth Century”. Whereas Burke and Cavallo cannot, it seems, escape their memories or emotions, even when they are self-destructive, Guffey’s ministry is always a ministry in drag. He takes on the identity of Lady Madonna at the beginning of the story and then sheds it at the end of the story. Guffey marks this transition with a ritual by pounding his right hand into his left hand nine times before dressing as Lady Madonna and after removing his drag outfit.¹³⁶ In this way, an all-consuming, propulsive fascination is itself externalized even on an individual level, subject to a costume and an established set of hours in the day.

It is significant, in this regard, that Guffey is Irish. Unlike the Italian Cavallo or Burke, whose ethnicity isn’t clear, Guffey’s ethnic origins are both apparent and removed from DeLillo’s own ethnic origins. As Josphe Dewey observed, Guffey, like DeLillo, must have been “[s]chooled in Roman Catholicism, drawn by the deep rituals of the Mass and the drama of the sacraments,”¹³⁷ yet he is not Italian. That the Irish and the Germans were the socially superior Catholics in New York City until after World War II meant that during DeLillo’s childhood their social identity was partly determined by their religion but not as wholly as for Italian Catholics. DeLillo, then, might be understood as establishing a distance not only between an inward, consuming religiosity and Lady Madonna’s externalization of that religiosity, but also between the ethno-religious Italian identity of his own upbringing and ethno-religious identities wherein that hyphen is less resistant to solubility.

¹³⁶ DeLillo, “In the Men’s Room,” 174, 246.

¹³⁷ Dewey, *Beyond Grief and Nothing*, 11.

VI. *Americana*

My contention, here, is that while religiosity provides the background for the most provocative of DeLillo's early fiction, it nevertheless reveals itself in the narratives of "The River Jordan" and "Take the 'A' Train" to be far too volatile to produce anything but internal combustion for his characters. This I relate to the practically apocalyptic force of religion during the Sixties, when—by virtue of the rapidly changing modes and mores of religious life in the U.S.—religion is terrifyingly malleable and fragile at the same time. Educated for sixteen years in Catholic schools, the product of an Italian family and a close-knit Italian American community in The Bronx, and twenty-three years old at the turn of the decade—DeLillo would have been almost prototypically sensitive to the sea-change in Catholicism and in religions East and West more generally. When David Bell in *Americana* makes his pilgrimage across the U.S., he obsessively notes the religious identities of the people he sees and meets, yet he remains aloof to the implications of religious selfhood throughout the novel. In some sense, David's cataloguing of religious identities is an ironic precursor to DeLillo's contention that the "true American religion" is the American people. But only in the closing pages of the novel is this aloofness challenged, particularly by the story that a character named Sullivan tells David. At his request, she narrates an autobiographical story of a trip to Maine to meet her uncle, an Irishman whose hatred for Catholics and Catholicism made him "the blackest of ex-Catholics, a blasphemer of the militant and dour type."¹³⁸ The morning after her arrival Sullivan and her uncle Malcolm sail his boat, *Marston Moor*, out into the ocean. The climax of the story arrives during their chaotic return through evening and nighttime harbor fogs. Sullivan's strange, Joycean story turns apocalyptic as the boat shoots through the wind and fog of Somes Sound:

¹³⁸ Don DeLillo, *Americana* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 321.

And through the silver and gray smoke there appeared a light on the shore at the last limits of the sound. And a figure held the light. And it was a stranger. And Uncle saw him and spoke. Jesus needs me. *Jesus needs me*, he said. And the light was a lantern and the face was like unto light itself. And in those days men shall seek death, and shall not find it; and they shall desire to die, and death shall fly from them. And Uncle had come to the end of the mystery, which is: that man receives his being as did Christ, in a gentle woman's womb, beyond the massed and silent armies, beyond eroded stone arranged across the lampless past; which is: that all energy runs down, all life expires, all except the force of all in all, or light lighting light; which is: the figure holding the lantern was a child. And from this knowledge he did turn and scorn and rant against his ship. For where was Christ the tiger in that pentecostal light?¹³⁹

It is impossible for me to do justice here to the throttling force of this visionary sequence, from which I have quoted only a section. Sadly, I must turn immediately to David's reaction to Sullivan's absorbing and disturbing tale.

David interrupts Sullivan on at least three occasions to say that he's bored, that he doesn't like the story, and to voice his desire that the story be finished. It palpably discomforts him, though he refuses to admit this outright, which is in keeping with his unshakably cool demeanor throughout the novel. The manifest zeal and fervor of the story confronts David with an intimate, earnest, terrifying religious consciousness. No doubt the confrontation is made more severe because of the ambiguity of the story-teller's position. When he first asks Sullivan to tell him a story, David wonders aloud: "Are you going to make it up?"¹⁴⁰ Although she informs him that it

¹³⁹ DeLillo, *Americana*, 330.

¹⁴⁰ DeLillo, *Americana*, 320.

is, indeed, “real,” she also admits that her story has been “rehearsed.” “In fact,” she says, “I’ve told it many times, refining, editing, polishing, getting nearer and nearer the awesome truth. But I have never yet revealed that truth.”¹⁴¹ So that when Sullivan enters the apocalyptic section of her narrative, it is unclear to David, as it is to us, whether she has dropped into a thicket of ecstatic telling or if her performance is just consummately polished. The fear, for David, is that these are expressions of a real religiosity which threatens the integrity of his suave defenses.

Thus, at the end of *Americana*, the disinterestedness that allows “In the Men’s Room of the Sixteenth Century” to canter on without an implosion meets the personal fervor that culminates in shattering conclusions in “The River Jordan” and “Take the ‘A’ Train”. This tension, I believe, will continue to disrupt, enliven, and spur DeLillo’s fiction until it at least *Underworld*, where it is most explicitly addressed *as* a tension.

¹⁴¹ DeLillo, *Americana*, 322.

Chapter 3: Returning from the Wilderness

“Always some men go away.”
—Don DeLillo
The Names

“O quit your station, your present habitation, the wilderness is better, though not as an abode, yet as a passage.”
—Isaac Penington
An Eccho from the Great Deep

I. Critiquing the Westward Imperative

Throughout his first six novels, DeLillo relentlessly interrogates an ascetic American spirituality that he equates with a desire to enter the West, to extend the frontier, and to inhabit the desert. It is a desire akin to David Bell’s when he asks Sullivan to tell him about “ ‘the great golden West and the Indians and the big outdoor soul of America’.”¹⁴² The literary critic Mark Osteen has argued that the ascetic themes, which are equated in his essay with the desert landscape, of DeLillo’s second novel, *End Zone*, “constitute a thoroughgoing critique of the American ascetic ideal as a solution to technological anxiety.”¹⁴³ Indeed, *End Zone*, a darkly comic, philosophically inclined sports-novel about football players in West Texas, concludes as the main character, Gary Harkness, begins a severe regimen of fasting:

In my room at five o’clock the next morning I drank half a cup of lukewarm water. It was the last food or drink I would take for many days. High fevers burned a thin straight channel through my brain. In the end they had to carry me to the infirmary and feed me through plastic tubes.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² DeLillo, *Americana*, 117.

¹⁴³ Mark Osteen, “Against the End: Asceticism and Apocalypse in Don DeLillo’s *End Zone*,” *Papers on Language & Literature* 26, no. 1 (1990): pg. 144.

¹⁴⁴ Don DeLillo, *End Zone* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 241-2.

Osteen cites this abstention from “food or drink” as an example of the “ascetic ideal” in *End Zone*. And other critics have also recognized the ascetic impulse in these early novels. “The characters in all four novels [*Americana*, *End Zone*, *Great Jones Street*, and *Ratner’s Star*] perceive the world about them rushing toward oblivion and recognize their only hope to retard such disintegration in Thoreau’s advice to simplify,” Michael Oriard wrote in “Don DeLillo’s Search for Walden Pond.”¹⁴⁵ Oriard refers to this “perverse drive toward uniformity” as “American asceticism.”

However, while Osteen detects a “thoroughgoing critique” of these ascetic practices, Oriard locates in them “the possibility of regeneration.”¹⁴⁶ The opposition here is not inexplicable. Oriard’s argument for “the possibility of regeneration,” for example, is only unconvincing in terms of the novels he presents. In the total scope of DeLillo’s writings, there are, variously, novels in which the possibility of regeneration is revealed, in which its fulfillment is denied, and in which its consummation is enacted. Harsh recriminations of “ascetic desert spirituality”—my term for the complex of practices, ideas, and images under discussion—are certainly prevalent in the early part of his career. As such I think Osteen is accurate in arguing that *End Zone* formulates a critique of asceticism. The “turn” in DeLillo’s portrayal of ascetic desert spirituality arrives with his eighth novel, *The Names*. It is this turn that I intend to explore. But in order to conduct this exploration properly, I need to contextualize the difference of *The Names*. Accordingly, the next three sections frame (1) the dynamics of ascetic desert spirituality, (2) “the possibility of regeneration” as it is articulated in *Americana*, and (3) the centrality of “networks” to these dynamics and this possibility, particularly as elaborated by Mark C. Taylor in his reading of *Underworld*.

¹⁴⁵ Michael Oriard, “Don DeLillo’s Search for Walden Pond” (1978), in *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Don DeLillo*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 7.

¹⁴⁶ Oriard, “Don DeLillo’s Search for Walden Pond,” 7.

For the purposes of this chapter, provisional definitions of “the desert” and “asceticism” will no doubt prove beneficial. Regarding the former, it is helpful in some sense to understand the scientific criteria and the technical terminology of physical geography, e.g. low rainfall, sparse vegetation, extreme aridity. However, the archetypal desert that occupies DeLillo’s thoughts is the one succinctly described by Edward Abbey as “the arid wasteland where nothing human can find permanent habitation.”¹⁴⁷ For DeLillo, as I intend to demonstrate, the danger of a “permanent habitation” in the desert is considerable. Now, regarding “asceticism,” two formulations given by Michel Foucault in his lectures on *Security, Territory, Population* seem to address dimensions which DeLillo engages. First, asceticism “is an exercise of self on self; it is a sort of close combat of the individual with himself”; and, second, asceticism “is a sort of...egoistic self-mastery.”¹⁴⁸ Admittedly, Foucault’s formulations are secular. Kallistos Ware, however, citing the Orthodox theologian Nicolas Berdyaev, affirms this potentially secularizing dimension of ascetic practices:

Asceticism...leads us to self-mastery and enables us to fulfill the purpose we have set for ourselves, whatever that may be. A certain measure of ascetic self-denial is thus a necessary element in *all* that we undertake, whether in athletics or in politics, in scholarly research or in prayer.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Edward Abbey and David Muench, *Desert Images: An American Landscape* (New York: Gallery Books, 1986), 13. Of course, many people have been permanent inhabitants of the desert, from the Tuareg to the Bedouin. Abbey’s description is valuable, however, precisely for its anti-romantic vision of total inhospitability. DeLillo is absolutely concerned with the inhospitable or unlivable nature of the desert and it is one of the main points of exploration in this analysis.

¹⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan: Republique Francaise, 2007), 205, 208.

¹⁴⁹ Kallistos Ware, “The Way of Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?,” ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, in *Asceticism*, proceedings of Ascetic Dimension in Religious Life and Culture, Union Theological Seminary, New York City (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3 (my emphasis).

For several of DeLillo's characters, whose roles and occupations range from football player to book-editor, the cultivation of a competition between ego and body is a defining trait, albeit one that often leads to disastrous ends. So while I admit that a lack of spiritual perspective besets the rest of this chapter, I believe that DeLillo's fiction allows that elision to occur and still admit a strong critical reading of ascetic desert spirituality.

II. To Enter, Inhabit, and Return

In the final pages of DeLillo's sixth novel, *Running Dog*, the main character, Howard Glen Selvy, is killed in the Chihuahuan Desert. Subsequently, Selvy's murderer hacks off his head to take as a trophy with him. Following this murder and beheading, the novel concludes with Levi Blackwater, a friend and mentor of the deceased, walking toward Selvy's corpse, reflecting on his duty as a *lama* (a chief or high priest of the Tibetan tradition) to direct his protégé's spirit out of his body. Blackwater knows only that Selvy is dead, not that he has been beheaded.

After chanting, he would try to determine whether the spirit had indeed departed. Levi wasn't sure he knew how to do this. But he believed he would *feel* something; something would *tell* him whether he was on the right path. He knew for certain how you started. You started by plucking a few strands of hair from the top of the dead man's head.¹⁵⁰

This grimly ironic denouement—whereby Blackwater readies himself to send Selvy's spirit onto the afterlife without realizing that he will be confronted by a corpse that cannot be properly ritualized—reflects DeLillo's acid appraisal of Blackwater, who is characterized by an arrogant appropriation of Eastern spirituality (e.g. his self-bestowal of the title "*lama*") and a rejection of

¹⁵⁰ Don DeLillo, *Running Dog* (New York: Knopf, 1978), 246 (emphasis in original).

society for desert life. DeLillo is also leveling a critique at Selvy, who is drawn to the desert by a death-wish and a desire to disconnect from the life of the city. On his entrance into the Chihuahuan Desert, Selvy reflects: “All behind him now. Cities, buildings, people, systems. All the relationships and links.”¹⁵¹ These “relationships and links” are the interconnections of sociality he has sought to leave behind. “He could forget [all] that now,” Selvy thinks. Yet Selvy, who came to the desert not only to sever his “relationships and links,” but also to die, does not “approach death with a clear mind,” as he had desired.¹⁵² Instead as his last breath expires, he realizes, “What he really needed...was a drink.” In this way DeLillo’s characters in *Running Dog* are confronted with dark reversals of their expectations when they seek to alienate themselves from networks of living.

In addition, Selvy and Blackwater are both described in *Running Dog* as ascetics of a kind. At one point Blackwater’s time as a prisoner of the Vietcong is described. Regarding the torture and captivity he endured, DeLillo writes: “He’d come out stronger, or so he believed, having lived through pain and confinement, the machine of self.”¹⁵³ If we recall the articulations of “asceticism” provided by Foucault and Ware, Blackwater’s “machine of self” might be understood as the vehicle of his “egoistic self-mastery.” Significantly, I think, even in an otherwise sympathetic account of Blackwater’s capture, DeLillo’s qualifying clause, “or so he believed,” signals a dissent in the narrative voice, as if Blackwater’s sense of increased strength is less than unassailable. Selvy is also figured as a subject of discipline, though of the United States military and not its counterparts. More than this, he appears to be akin to the typically ascetic figure inasmuch as routine and abstention seem to order his life explicitly. At the start of *Running Dog*

¹⁵¹ DeLillo, *Running Dog*, 192.

¹⁵² DeLillo, *Running Dog*, 239.

¹⁵³ DeLillo, *Running Dog*, 231.

Selvy's strictures on sex and his regimen of shaving are both disrupted in consequence of his relationship with Moll Robbins.

He'd broken the sex rule and now he had nearly three days' growth. But the routine still applied. The routine in one sense was his physical movement between New York and Washington, and the set pieces of procedure, the subroutines, that were part of his travel. In a larger context the routine was a mind set, all those mechanically performed operations of the intellect that accompanied this line of work.¹⁵⁴

To interpret the ascetic ethos of this passage, I turn again to Ware, who provides another formulation of asceticism, this time drawn from the Orthodox priest Alexander Elchaninov, which aligns with Selvy's catena of "routines," "procedures," and "subroutines": "A system of exercises which submits the body to the spirit."¹⁵⁵ He writes further: "Refinement, not destruction: that is the aim." For Selvy it is, "in a larger context," a "mind set," a matter of the "intellect," which guides him in the physical discipline of his body and movements. Ware refers to this body-to-spirit submission as an asceticism in the vein of "*enkrateia*" or "self-control." And Selvy is a master of self-control throughout *Running Dog*. It even seems that one of his few lapses in total control causes his death during the knife-fight.

In light of this exposition of DeLillo's earlier, sterner perspective on the ascetic impulse, it seems to me that DeLillo's articulation of the dynamics of ascetic desert spirituality stems from an unremarkable but widely applicable insight that unites the likes of travel-writer Sir Wilfred Thesiger, army officer T. E. Lawrence, and theologian David Jasper, that is, they were—

¹⁵⁴ DeLillo, *Running Dog*, 81.

¹⁵⁵ Ware, "The Way of Ascetics," 10.

all of them—*travelers* in their respective wildernesses.¹⁵⁶ This is not to say that they were “tourists.” Instead it is to recognize that each of them returned from the wilderness they entered, whether of Arabia or the Badlands of South Dakota. Before his death in 2001, Thesiger admitted that he had set down his “most important years” in his classic travel book *Arabian Sands*: the five years he spent trekking through the Empty Quarter of Arabia with Bedouin lions.¹⁵⁷ Yet despite Thesiger’s affirmation that his years in the *Rub’ al-Khali* were the “most memorable” of his life, he chose not to—or perhaps *could* not—live there. Aside from a very few, those who enter the desert, tend to return from it as well. Along these lines, Ware observes that in the *Life* of St. Antony of Egypt “the ascetic undertakes, not simply a flight in order to escape, but a flight followed by a return.”¹⁵⁸

In this respect, from the angle of asceticism—or, in this case, monasticism—the Benedictine historian and scholar Adalbert de Vogüé observed: “the clergy may also stay for a long time as guests (*hospites suscipiantur*) in the monastery, but cannot ‘inhabit it’ (*in monasterio habitare*), that is, assume the monastic condition.”¹⁵⁹ Vogüé isn’t referring to an arbitrary restriction on the amount of time that the clergy can stay in a monastery; rather he is acknowledging that guests of a monastery—no matter their clerical status—are incapable of developing the *habitus*, the “way of being or acting,” of monastic practice. Without becoming a monk you may only retreat for a few stolen days to the confines of an abbey, he says. There is neither time enough nor the proper immersion to enter into the rhythms of a daily liturgy that works upon the body, nor to

¹⁵⁶ See: Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* (New York: Dutton, 1959); T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991); David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

¹⁵⁷ Wilfred Thesiger, “Sir Wilfred Thesiger: Interview, April 2000,” interview by François Quintin, in *The Desert*, Fondation Cartier (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 170.

¹⁵⁸ Ware, “The Way of Ascetics,” 5.

¹⁵⁹ Adalbert de Vogüé, *La Règle du Maître*, vol. 2, Sources Chrétiennes, no. 105 (Paris: Editions Du Cerf, 1964), 342-46. Quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford University Press, 2013), 13.

accommodate yourself to the calls and carillons of bells that sing not their hearers, but to their interpreters.

Moreover, the paradigmatic narrative of an entrance into and return from the desert is the Israelites' forty years of wandering before their conquest of the Promised Land. Between Mount Sinai and the Land of Canaan, throughout the last three books of the Hebrew Bible, they are not only rootless and homeless. The deferral of their entrance into the land is intended by God to cause the attrition of the *dor ha-midbar* (generation of the Wilderness), who were shown to be incapable of appreciating the miracles enacted for them by their responses to the report of the twelve spies (Numbers 13:1-14). In another sense, one could argue, too, that this deferral was necessary to prepare the land for the coming of Israelites. One of the *midrashim* collected in Louis Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews* corroborates this interpretation:

At the time when Israel departed from Egypt, Palestine was in poor condition; the trees planted in the time of Noah were old and withered. Hence God said: "What! Shall I permit Israel to enter an uninhabitable land? I shall bid them wander in the desert for forty years, that the Canaanites may in the meantime fell the old trees and plant new ones, so that Israel, upon entering the land, may find it abounding in plenty."¹⁶⁰

God, in this account, acts as a homemaker, bidding the land of Canaan and the Canaanites (per-
versely, it must be said) to be ready for the rightful denizens. There occurs a dual process of puri-

¹⁶⁰ Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin, 2nd ed., vol. Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2003), pg. 718. Ginzberg's monumental *The Legends of the Jews* is an "attempt to gather from the original sources all Jewish legends, in so far as they refer to Biblical personages and events, and reproduce them" in one narrative thread composed by Ginzberg himself (xxxi).

fication and preparation: that of the Israelites in their purgation of the *dor ha-midbar* and that of Canaan in its unwitting beautification for the coming conquerors.

To return to the problem of “permanent habitation” that I alluded to when I quoted Abbey’s definition of “desert”: for the majority, the desert is not a home, nor can it be an escape from networks of living; it is a place between, a waiting-station. Even the tradition of solitary Christian monkhood in the desert was eventually absorbed into communitarian life under the pressure of Church Fathers opposed to individualistic desert-dwelling. “At least up to the monastic renewal of the eleventh century,” Giorgio Agamben observes, “which with Romuald and Peter Damian saw the rekindling of the ‘tension between cenoby and hermitage’...the primacy of the communitarian life over that of the hermit is a constant tendency. This culminates in the decision of the Council of Toledo (646), according to which...no one can be admitted to the life of the hermit without first having first passed through the cenobitic life.”¹⁶¹ In other words, life in community, in networks of relation, is privileged above lone hermetic practice.

Writing of what he called “la baptême de la solitude” in the Sahara Desert, the writer Paul Bowles said it was a “strange, and by no mean pleasant, process of reintegration” when—lingering in the desert at night—“nothing is left but your own breathing and the sound of your heart beating.”¹⁶² This is one dimension of desert solitude. And yet the distinction that must be reckoned between Selvy and Bowles is that for Bowles solitude is not an escape from sociality but a brief entrance into aloneness. On the other hand, Selvy’s solitude is simply the prelude to death, feeding into his death-driven ascetic discipline. And certainly between “passing through” and “dwelling” there exists an array of nebulous states of habitation. It is the ruse of “dwelling”—or the illusion of “permanent habitation”—that, beginning with *The Names*, becomes the

¹⁶¹ Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, 11.

¹⁶² Paul Bowles, “Baptism of Solitude,” in *Too Far from Home: The Selected Writings of Paul Bowles*, ed. Daniel Halpern (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1993), 571.

specific subject of DeLillo's critiques of desert ascetic spirituality. Dwelling outside community, for DeLillo, implies disconnection and violent separation; it denies the veritable need to return to networks of living. Indeed, throughout DeLillo's writings, characters tend to drift into isolation, into terrestrial wilderness, into consuming environments. One of the critical factors in these exits from sociality and organized life is the will to return. Characters, like Howard Glen Selvy and Levi Blackwater, who divorce themselves from networks of living without intention of returning, are the subject of repercussions, whether physical, psychic, or moral.

III. The Ascetic Impulse in *Americana*

As I mentioned above, although Michael Oriard's claim that "the possibility of regeneration" through asceticism is unconvincing from the perspective of DeLillo's first four novels, it is true that *Americana* contains the initial formulation of this concept. However, this "regeneration"—available in the act of entering into and returning from wilderness—must wait until later novels to find its proper development.

Near the end of the first part of *Americana*, David Bell asks his travelling companion, Sullivan, to tell him a story. This is the first of two monologue-stories that Sullivan tells in the novel (I discussed the second story at the end of Chapter 2). "I have just the thing," Sullivan replies. She then relates to him the monologue of an old Oglala Sioux holy man named Black Knife. Sullivan begins with Black Knife's apocalyptic vision of the coming America:

"What we really want to do, he said, deep in the secret recesses of our heart, all of us, is to destroy the forests, white saltbox houses, covered bridges, brownstones, azalea gardens, big red barns, colonial inns, riverboats, whaling villages, cider mills, waterwheels,

antebellum mansions, log cabins, lovely old churches and snug little railroad depots. All of us secretly favor this destruction, even conservationists, even those embattled individuals who make a career out of picketing graceful and historic old buildings to protest their demolition. It's what we are. Straight lines and right angles."¹⁶³

This desire, located "in the secret recesses of our heart," a desire for the obliteration of the quaint, idyllic, banal landscape of Middle America, is attributed by Black Knife to the ascetic impulse in the American character: " 'The ascetic hates waste. We plan the destruction of everything which does not serve the cause of efficiency. Hard to believe, he said, that we are ascetics. But we are, more than all the fake saints across the sea'."¹⁶⁴ And yet, despite the visceral grimness of his vision (" 'We want to wallow in the terrible gleaming mudcunt of Mother America' "¹⁶⁵), Black Knife's monologue ends with a recommendation. As Sullivan warns, " 'The biggest surprise was yet to come'."

"Black Knife went on to say, with a full moon above us, that this massive surrender to our deepest dreams and impulses would be the best thing that could happen. After all, it was the true expression of ourselves in the most profound darkness of our beings. We would attain complete self-realization. We would set forth on the world's longest march of vulgarity, evil and decadence. We would establish the greatest superstate of them all. The world would be on its knees before our crazed power—if it isn't already. And then, having set one foot into the mud, one foot and three toes, we would stop for a moment, take a look around, and decide whether to sink further and eventually die or whether to

¹⁶³ DeLillo, *Americana*, 118.

¹⁶⁴ DeLillo, *Americana*.

¹⁶⁵ DeLillo, *Americana*, 119.

return to firm land and begin again, living off roots and berries but no symbols, shedding the ascetic curse...”¹⁶⁶

In other words, only saturation can wake us from the torpor of our megalomania. And the benefit, or the end result, is inestimable: “ ‘It’s worth the risk, he said, for if we took [that] course we would become, finally, the America that fulfills all its possibilities. The America that belongs to the world.’ ”¹⁶⁷

The notion of the ascetic impulse in American culture which Black Knife propounds is threefold. First, American cultural life is ascetic and utilitarian. It is characterized by purifying aesthetics, the valorization of efficiency, and disgust with waste. Second, the ascetic impulse manifests in the desire to flatten, plane, and level landscapes, exterior as well as interior. Such manifestations may one day culminate in the fulfillment of the ascetic dream, which is the establishment of a superstate and the erasure of all “unneeded objects.” Third, this very same ascetic impulse may, at the moment of its most awful monstrousness, recognize itself and retreat from the precipice of the abyss to recuperate and live anew.

IV. Networks and *Underworld*

In *Rewiring the Real* (2013), the philosopher of religion Mark C. Taylor analyzed *Underworld* almost exactly according to the narrative Black Knife laid out, although Taylor never, in fact, mentions *Americana*. This homoplastic analysis is particularly noticeable in Taylor’s interpretation of Nick Shay, the main character of DeLillo’s *Underworld*.

¹⁶⁶ DeLillo, *Americana*, 120.

¹⁶⁷ DeLillo, *Americana*.

Shay is a “waste analyst” by occupation; he handles, disposes, and eliminates waste. He “watches his weight, eats healthy foods, and regularly runs along the drainage ditches that separate city from desert” in his “neat and tidy neighborhood” in Phoenix, Arizona.¹⁶⁸ Within the framework of *Underworld*, Shay’s larger, more thematic task is to jettison the garbage, the litter of his civilization, and he is, in daily life, all but allergic to corporeal and mental waste. This relationship to waste, which is both abstract and concrete, recalls to Black Knife’s notion of asceticism in *Americana*. In the dream of ascetic America, Sullivan says, “ ‘Nobody would ever sweat. Sweating is wastefulness.’ ”¹⁶⁹ From his desert habitation in Phoenix and disciplined regulation of body to his occupation as a “waste technician,” Nick Shay is an unassuming embodiment of Black Knife’s American ascetic. And Taylor argues that Nick, when we first encounter him in *Underworld*, hovers on the edge of his own self-realization, an argument strikingly analogous to Black Knife’s broad contention about ascetic America. “In the end,” Taylor wrote, “Nick longs for nothing as much as the very disorder he had spent his entire life trying to contain, control, and manage—not stability but instability, not security and securities but insecurity and insecurities, not system but excess.”¹⁷⁰ It is this tumble into excess, Taylor maintains, which Nick sees as an opportunity, only dimly understanding, to enter more deeply into himself.

However, the final pages of *Underworld* appear, at first, to resist Taylor’s argument; they reassert the primacy of the order and cleanliness that define Shay’s life. For instance, when Shay discovers that his wife has been cheating on him with a friend and co-worker, he sees, initially, only two options: abandon his family or avenge his wounded pride. He considers the former a lasting relief and the latter a short-term fix of rage. Both, however, are pride-bound. And, in-

¹⁶⁸ Taylor, *Rewiring the Real*, 207.

¹⁶⁹ DeLillo, *Americana*, 119.

¹⁷⁰ Taylor, *Rewiring the Real*, 208.

stead, he chooses a third way. For a man who has murdered, who was abandoned by a father, it is a hazier way.

Brian thought I was the soul of self-completion. Maybe so. But I was also living in a state of quiet separation from all the things he might cite as the solid stuff of home and work and responsible reality. When I found out about him and Marian I felt some stoic surrender. . . . I watch him sleep, thinking how satisfying it would be, ten serious smashes to his prep-school face. But it was also satisfying, for just a moment, to think of giving it all up, letting him have it all.¹⁷¹

Eventually, he confronts Brian, if not cordially, then at least without violence; and he begins to converse with his wife again. Later, Shay can say, “Marian and I are closer now, more intimate than we’ve ever been. The serrate edges have dulled away.”¹⁷² From the perspective of DeLillo’s entire corpus, the crescendos of violence and the annihilating separations that characterize the climaxes of earlier novels like *Americana*, *End Zone*, *Great Jones Street*, *Players*, and *White Noise*, are here repudiated. There occurs instead a tender resolution, an intimate relation of one person to another that bears no ultimate revelation.

Yet despite the ostensible satisfaction of this conclusion, Taylor remains ultimately correct: a longing for insecurity and excess undermines the newly reordered life that Shay has constructed out in the deserts of the American Southwest. “This is what I long for,” Shay growls in his last words of the novel, “the breach of peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant

¹⁷¹ Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1997), pg. 796.

¹⁷² DeLillo, *Underworld*, 803.

mystery to myself.”¹⁷³ It is precisely the “desert place” within which he dwells, and that causes him to feel helpless, that fosters Shay’s longing to break out of his ascetic regulations, to be rangy and mad and at odds with the world. Although Shay does not yet break in *Underworld* from his ascetic impulses, he has begun by the novel’s end to look rather like Black Knife’s hoped-for America—“one foot into the mud, one foot and three toes”—which looks around itself and, at last, *sees*.

V. Entering the Wilderness

Howard Glen Selvy, near the end of *Running Dog*, comes to understand that in his earlier training at the Marathon Mines of the Chihuahuan Desert, when he learned to kill and studied the tactics of the Front Libération Nationale and the Vietcong, he had been, in fact, “preparing to die.” “It was a course in dying,” Selvy muses. “In how to die violently.”¹⁷⁴ *Running Dog* marks a transition in DeLillo’s presentation of deserts and ascetics. Although *Americana* narrates a journey into the American West and parts of its desert terrain, *Running Dog* contains the first realistic and intimate treatment of desert landscapes in DeLillo’s fiction. *End Zone* and *Players* also contain descriptions of the desert but are less reflective of an intimate and observational interaction than even *Americana*, which tends to gloss over the American landscape ironically and sarcastically. David Bell admits near the end of the novel: “Even now, writing this, I can impart little of what I saw.”¹⁷⁵ In contrast to the lethargic and unobservant Bell, an ecstatic scene in *Running Dog* highlights the connection between Selvy and the environment of the Chihuahuan Desert. Weather, temperature, and being all collide, here:

¹⁷³ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 810.

¹⁷⁴ DeLillo, *Running Dog*, 183.

¹⁷⁵ DeLillo, *Americana*, 349-50.

After eating he went outside, wrapped in a blanket. It was still clear in this area, broad scale of stars. No more than thirty degrees now, dropping. Dry cold. A pure state. An elating state of cold. Not weather. It wasn't weather so much as memory. A category of being.¹⁷⁶

DeLillo evokes and pursues, here, a passage in *Americana*: “He began by saying there was no weather in Los Angeles and there never had been. The true weather was in ourselves Storm warnings up and down the subconscious. Ten-foot drifts along the outlying areas of the soul.”¹⁷⁷ This passage in *Running Dog*, however, takes the idea farther, locating the weather not only in the soul or the subconscious but in a corporeo-ontological dimension. The phrase “[a] pure state,” for example, could apply to either Selvy or the atmosphere around him, or both at once. Moreover, the weather is described as “memory” and as a “category of being,” thus signaling a mixture of the vocabulary of self—being or memory—and the atmosphere that Selvy inhabits. As he acclimates to the temperature, Selvy undergoes a change in himself, and his perceptions seem to affect the quality of the weather around him: “The temperature kept dropping but this didn't signify change It signified a concentration of the faculty of recall.” In other words, although the temperature drops, it does not “signify” change; or, perhaps, it is Selvy who does not *express* a change. And, ultimately, it signifies, as DeLillo states clearly, “a concentration of the faculty of recall,” once again causing an alteration in Selvy which clarifies a process of human life, in this case memory. Nothing of this kind occurs in *Americana*, because David Bell isolates himself from the landscapes he traverses with the cars in which he travels.

¹⁷⁶ DeLillo, *Running Dog*, 192.

¹⁷⁷ DeLillo, *Americana*, 94.

However, as described earlier, *Running Dog* is still cruel in its final comic thrust. DeLillo remains concerned with the menace of the desert. Moreover, the death-seeking asceticism that leads Selvy to his end cannot be extracted from the desert terrain in which it developed. He turns away from the interconnections, the systems of contemporary life, preferring “loneliness” (which Paul Bowles believed “presupposes memory,” whereas in genuine solitude “even memory disappears”).¹⁷⁸ Selvy is, finally, a lone individual set against the desert landscape. In *Rewiring the Real*, Taylor observes that “Though designed to control all kinds of processes that threaten to disrupt life, systems, DeLillo insists, harbor a disruptive mystery that can provoke wonder as well as anxiety. Far from being merely a danger, he regards this unsettling mystery as the only remaining hope in a world that is increasingly flat.”¹⁷⁹ If, as Taylor argues, systems and their “disruptive mystery” are “the only remaining hope,” then Selvy’s failure is his rejection of the systemic world, the blunt reality of contemporary America. Nevertheless, with *Running Dog* something has erupted in DeLillo’s fiction: an undeniable affection for and fascination with the desert. Following *Running Dog*, *The Names* heralds DeLillo’s initial forays into the recuperation of ascetic desert spirituality.

VI. An Eastward Journey

James Axton, the main character of *The Names*, travels as a “risk analyst” around the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Southeast Asia, reporting on the political climates of different strategic countries; his supervisors then give this information to corporations investing in insurance for employees and facilities in these countries. When the novel opens, James is quickly coming up on forty years of age, his “father’s age,” he says. He and his wife Kathryn, although separat-

¹⁷⁸ Bowles, “Baptism of Solitude,” 571.

¹⁷⁹ Taylor, *Rewiring the Real*, 184.

ed, are on speaking terms, and he visits her and his son Tap often. They reside, however, on an obscure island called Kouros in the Cyclades of the Aegean Sea. The narrative kicks into motion when one evening James is visiting them, Owen Brademas, the director of an archaeological dig taking place on Kouros, tells him about a cult-like group in the mountainous interior of the island which he had encountered. This strange group, Owen tells him, spoke only in Greek, although the members were not, as far as he could tell, native Greek-speakers. He says, too, that at first they asked him only, “*How many languages do you speak?*”¹⁸⁰ Not long after this conversation with Owen, an old man is murdered on the island, and James intuits that it was with this strange group that responsibility for the crime lay. So begins James’ long inquiry—which is the central plot of *The Names*—into the origins and meaning of this group and the cultic killings they perpetrate.

In the third section of *The Names*, “The Desert,” James meets Owen in India. During their last meeting, the two amateur sleuths had discussed the logic of the group’s killings, coming to the conclusion that a victim’s initials must be matched to the initials of the place where the victim is murdered.¹⁸¹ Owen now reveals that he has met and stayed with the group, who call themselves, as James, in fact, informs his friend, Ta Onómata: “The Names.” Lying ill and weak on a wooden bench in a small room, Owen relates to James the story of his search for the group and the events that occurred following his arrival at their temporary encampment outside the small town of Hawa Mandir. His story narrates a gradual entrance into the wilderness of India, ever entering into more distant places, yet drawing always closer to the desert outside Hawa Mandir. Owen’s sojourn, as will be clear, is a manifestly religious one. DeLillo writes:

¹⁸⁰ Don DeLillo, *The Names* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 28.

¹⁸¹ Cornel Bonca aptly described the larger implications of this “logic,” when he wrote: “The group is playing a nihilist end-game with the idea that language is arbitrary, that signifiers and signifieds lack any essential connection” (“Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*” 461).

Owen smiled again, thinking how in the midst of this wandering among Jains, Muslims, Sikhs, the Buddhist students in Sarnath, stunned time and again by the fairytale dynamics of Hindu cosmology, he had begun to think of himself once more as a Christian, simply by way of fundamental identification, by way of linking himself to the everyday medley he found around him. When people asked, this is what he said. *Christian*. How strange it sounded.¹⁸²

Owen's identification with Christianity hasn't anything much to do with a personal spiritual impulse. This state of affairs ought to be reminiscent of the discussion in Chapter 1 about immanent, embodied Catholicism. Thrust into the terrain of pilgrimage and religiosity, Owen recovers the social inheritance of his religiosity without needing to reevaluate his metaphysical understandings. It is a matter of the "everyday medley," as he says, not of last things.

Yet as Owen moves from this sphere of sociality, where his religious identity is restored by the necessity of social forces, to the cultic space of the Ta Onómata group, his religion becomes a product of *exclusion* from the social world. In a brief conversation with a member of the group named Avtar Singh, Owen is confronted with his own implicit membership by the very fact that he dwells among them:

"You're waiting, then, until he enters town."

"You know this. You're a member now."

"No, I'm not."

"Of course you're a member."

¹⁸² DeLillo, *The Names*, 281.

“No, I’m not.”

“Damn fool. Of course you are.”¹⁸³

Despite his firm protestations to the contrary, Owen is cleverly belied by DeLillo’s suspension of the question mark from his initial question, transforming his inquiry into a statement of fact. While contending with this negative imposition of religious identity, an identity by way of exclusion, Owen further converses with Singh. At one point in their conversation Singh explains to him his affection for the desert. He concludes with an observation on the alphabet of Yezidi script. “Each sound has one sign only,” Singh says. “This is the genius of the alphabet. Simple, inevitable. No wonder it happened in the desert.”¹⁸⁴ Singh’s description of this peculiar alphabet dovetails with DeLillo’s negative interpretations of ascetic spirituality, seeing in it the diminishment of possibility and a narrowing of fate. In *Falling Man*, for instance, DeLillo conveys the militant Islamism of the 9/11 hijacker Mohamed Atta in the same terms of dangerous asceticism, an asceticism that eradicates choice:

The end of our life is predetermined. We are carried toward that day from the minute we are born. There is no sacred law against what we are going to do. This is not suicide in any meaning or interpretation of the word. It is only something long written. We are finding the way already chosen for us.¹⁸⁵

In DeLillo’s narrative Atta expresses for Islam the same ascetic impulse that Singh saw in the letters of Yezidi script: “Simple, *inevitable*.” John McClure, in his study of postsecular fiction,

¹⁸³ DeLillo, *The Names*, 298.

¹⁸⁴ DeLillo, *The Names*, 295.

¹⁸⁵ Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (New York: Scribner, 2007), 175.

Partial Faiths, similarly draws a parallel between asceticism and terrorism in DeLillo's work: "[DeLillo] tends to identify a second form of spirituality, what I am calling the path of separation, with an even more automatically 'othered' enterprise, that of terrorism."¹⁸⁶ Indeed, DeLillo once wrote of *The Names*: "I was interested in showing two kinds of violence. The violence of terrorists, which is political, rooted in causes, issues, arguments. And the violence of the cult, which is esoteric, almost spiritual."¹⁸⁷

Moreover, I think the terrorist-asceticism registered by McClure is similar to Selvy's experience in the Chihuahuan Desert of *Running Dog*: "All that incoherence. Selection, election, option, alternative. All behind him now. Codes and formats. Courses of action. Values, bias, predilection." "Choice," Selvy concludes, "is a subtle form of disease."¹⁸⁸ He, too, rejects the possibility of possibilities. However, McClure ends by intuiting from his reading of *Players*, *Running Dog*, and *The Names* that "DeLillo is suspicious...not just of contemporary culture and the aberrant asceticisms it sponsors but of the ascetic path itself."¹⁸⁹ Here, I differ from McClure. I will now begin to describe the treacherous, often ambiguous, return from wilderness that recuperates certain aspects of ascetic desert spirituality in DeLillo's fiction.

VII. Returning from the Wilderness

In the end, Owen Brademas emerges broken from his desert sojourn. But before the narrative of *The Names* refocuses on James and drifts away, Owen makes a crucial declaration of his belief in systems and meaning. Upon being asked if he had stayed inside one of the grain silos outside Hawa Mandir during the murder of the old man Hamir Mazmudar, Owen replies:

¹⁸⁶ John A. McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), pg. 71.

¹⁸⁷ *DeLillo Archives*, Box 109, Folder 3.

¹⁸⁸ DeLillo, *Running Dog*, 192.

¹⁸⁹ McClure, *Partial Faiths*, 74.

Yes, of course. Why would I come out, to watch them kill him? These killings mock us. They mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls. They make the system equal to the terror. The means to contend with death has become death. Did I always know this? It took the desert to make it clear to me.¹⁹⁰

If we adhere to Taylor's suppositions on the place of systems in *Underworld*—that they are the “only remaining hope”—Owen's expression of anger can be understood as DeLillo's first full development of this idea. Owen is enraged by the way in which the cult mocks systemic imperatives and the desire for meaning-making that human beings harbor. “Though designed to control and regulate all kinds of flows,” Taylor comments, “these systems inevitably produce a resistant surplus of remainder that either transforms or destroys them.” Similarly, Black Knife's vision of ascetic apocalypse admits that the ordering, clarifying, and regulating cultural impulse of American life is the means for annihilation and salvation alike. DeLillo himself clearly reiterated Owen's argument in “In the Ruins of the Future,” written in the wake of September 11th.

There are stories of heroism and encounters with dread. There are stories that carry around their edges the luminous ring of coincidence, fate, or premonition. They take us beyond the hard numbers of dead and missing and give us a glimpse of elevated being. For a hundred who are arbitrarily dead, we need to find one person saved by a flash of forewarning.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ DeLillo, *The Names*, 308.

¹⁹¹ Don DeLillo, “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September,” *Harper's Magazine* 303, no. 1819 (2001): pg. 34.

What the group disgraces, from this perspective, is the need to create narrative from errant data and stray images, to fashion meaning from terror and the darkness of our chaotic lives. To paraphrase one of Miri Rubin's insights into the eucharist, the actions and ethos of the cult ought to be considered an exploitation of the "tension inherent in human action, between the capacity to construct meaning-laden symbols, and the consequent imperatives of living by them, adhering to them and maintaining their meanings when they become susceptible to the vagaries and vicissitudes of human interpretation."¹⁹² In their nihilistic juxtapositions, their grim structuring of a illogic of death—initials matched to initials arbitrarily—beyond any God or necessary impulse, the Ta Onómata group mocks the dim, unsteady answers wrought from our systems of meaning.

The Names, however, is essentially James' story, and it rests with him to return from the visceral "Desert" of Owen's telling and bring back something from his long descent into cultic shadows and desert discipline. As he admits upon leaving the small dark lodging of Owen's feverish habitation: "I came away from the old city feeling I'd been engaged in a contest of some singular and gratifying kind. Whatever he lost in life-strength, this is what I'd won."¹⁹³ And the final pages of *The Names* are, in a way, a repetition of Owen's desert sojourn, except they are now being repeated through events in James' life. Just as Owen is confronted by his own membership in Ta Onómata, James learns that he has unwittingly been working for the CIA during his travels as a risk analyst, sending his assessments to offices in Langley, Virginia. The connections between Ta Onómata and the CIA are far from vague. DeLillo has said, for instance, that

¹⁹² Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1.

¹⁹³ DeLillo, *The Names*, 307.

the intelligence agencies that create and service...paranoia are not interesting to me as spy handlers or masters of espionage. They represent old mysteries and fascinations, inef-fable things. Central intelligence. They're like churches that hold the final secrets.¹⁹⁴

This mixture of religion and secrecy which DeLillo sees in “central intelligence” is reminiscent of the secrecy of the Ta Onómata group as much as of the paranoia of James’ supervisors, who know, unlike him, the institution that employs them. However there are subtle differences in the way things play out for James.

Most importantly, the murder of Hamir Mazmudar is nearly (but not quite) replicated in the assassination attempt against James’ friend David Keller. Running alone in the park in the early morning, James hears gunshots from down the hill. Sliding through foliage down to the origins of the gunshots, he finds Keller shot in the shoulder but substantially unhurt. The most terrifying moment of the entire event, in fact, is when one of the would-be assassins, running from the scene of the crime, passes James on his descent to Keller. Yet the assassin pauses for only an instant in front of the frightened risk analyst before loping on past. Nonetheless, James is beset, as Owen was for the death of Hamir Mazmudar, by guilt for his involvement. In light of the public disclosure of his employer, he wonders if he was himself the intended target. James frets over whether a Greek man named Andreas Eliades, whom he met earlier in the novel, set up the assassination attempt and what the implications would be if indeed he had:

It was Andreas who mistook me for David Keller the night we first met. He thought I was the banker. Did his companions think David was the risk analyst? The possibility is

¹⁹⁴ Don DeLillo, “Don DeLillo: The Art of Fiction No. 135,” interview by Adam Begley, *Paris Review* 128, Fall 1993, 303. Quoted in McClure, *Partial Faiths*, 71-2.

haunting, that there is an exact correspondence at the center of all this confusion, this formlessness of motive and plan and execution. A harmony.¹⁹⁵

This sensation of harmonious confusion which James feels ought to recall the arbitrary symmetry of the cult's murders. There, too, is an "exact correspondence," one of initials to initials, even while every other aspect of Ta Onómata and its murders may seem disordered and chaotic.

But, in the last pages of "The Desert," James visits the Parthenon on the Athenian Acropolis, which he had avoided throughout his year of residence in the city.¹⁹⁶ While his newly revealed involvement in the CIA and the shooting of Keller had launched James into a mirrored trajectory of Owen's descent to brokenness, this last event revives him. Inverting the linguistic obsession of the Ta Onómata group, the babble of many tongues at the site of the Acropolis delivers James to a renewed connection with the world. As Mark Osteen suggests, "In recognizing language not as a tool for subjugation but as a sign of community, James achieves a self-obliteration more potent and positive than does the Names cult."¹⁹⁷ "This is a place," James himself marvels, "to enter in crowds, seek company and talk. Everyone is talking."¹⁹⁸ For the first time, he enters into community with the city of Greece, hearing "what remains to the mauled stones" of the Acropolis, "this open cry, this voice we know as our own."¹⁹⁹

Throughout *The Names*, James refuses to be settled. The entire life he constructs for himself is dictated by a desire to be ungrounded, afloat. "I began to think of myself as a perennial tourist," James remarks early in the narrative.²⁰⁰ "Athens was my legal home but I wasn't ready

¹⁹⁵ DeLillo, *The Names*, 325.

¹⁹⁶ The first sentence of *The Names* is, in fact, "For a long time I stayed away from the Acropolis."

¹⁹⁷ Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 136.

¹⁹⁸ DeLillo, *The Names*, 331.

¹⁹⁹ DeLillo, *The Names*, 330.

²⁰⁰ DeLillo, *The Names*, 43.

to give up tourism, even here.” In opposition to this long drawn-out tourism, James recalls at one point the domestic life he once shared with his wife and child. He gathers the sensation of the feeling of “place” that he had then in three words: “*Here I am.*”²⁰¹ “Living alone I never felt it,” he ruefully laments. “Or maybe it’s just that my days and nights had become less routine. Travel, hotels. The surroundings changed too often.” Only upon visiting the Acropolis does James retrieve his sense of place. Whereas Ta Onómata blended language, community, and place in order to menace and mock, all these elements combine at the Acropolis to return James to the world and his place in it, specifically by making him realize his relation to the city of Athens. “And this is what I mainly learned up there,” James muses “that the Parthenon was not a thing to study but to feel. . . . It wasn’t a relic species of dead Greece but part of the living city below it.”²⁰² “People come through the gateway, people in streams and clusters, in mass assemblies. No one seems to be alone.” Athens’ status as an international city allows the wash of “German, French, Japanese, accented English” to return him to the larger world—not merely to Athens. James returns from the Wilderness and finds himself, although not without struggle, home.

²⁰¹ DeLillo, *The Names*, 82.

²⁰² DeLillo, *The Names*, 330.

Conclusion: “This is plenty. This is more than enough.”

Early in his memoir *A Scholar's Tale*, Geoffrey Hartman voices a few opinions about his dissertation, and then first book, *Unmediated Vision: An Interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke, and Valéry* (1954). He dwells, particularly, on his debt to phenomenology in developing an argument about these modern poets' aim to come “face-to-face” with either divine or sublime human reality. Indeed, the epigraph for *Unmediated Vision* came from Deuteronomy: “The Lord talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire. I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to shew you the word of the Lord: for ye were afraid by reason of the fire, and went not up into the mount” (5:4-5).²⁰³ However, by the time Hartman's third book, *Wordsworth's Poetry* (1964), had been written, “some naïveté had worn off.” “The ‘unmediated’ turned out to be a construct,” he says, “or the historical outcome of an extraordinary individual achievement that included a fortunate forgetfulness or ignorance of historical precursors.”²⁰⁴ Wordsworth, Hartman concludes in the later book, delivers the sublime not directly, not face-to-face, as he had earlier supposed, but through artful, practiced “mediations.” Hartman lays bare the full moral depth and complexity of this argument only at the end of his memoir. “Mediation involves a risky engagement,” he observes, “and the likelihood, to which a ritual repetition testifies, of periodic anxiety, dearth, death, and disaster, of having to deal again and again with failure, rejection, singularity.”²⁰⁵ Mediation is a sense of reality, and for Hartman, it nearly *is* reality. “The Modernist movement in art understood that an overdose of realism would damage our

²⁰³ Geoffrey H. Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 14.

²⁰⁴ Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale*, 22.

²⁰⁵ Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale*, 164.

sense of reality. Techniques of estrangement were introduced as a countermeasure,” he writes.²⁰⁶ Mediated reality is what remains of reality after we have begun to cope with it; following our estrangement, it is the gaze backward.

Hartman’s insights on mediation are the hard-fought achievement of decades of study, thought, and writing. (What preceded this paragraph and what will follow are simplifications, because I am not here to give Hartman my full attention; he is a pivot upon which I can turn a series of readings into a reflection.) For all its distinctiveness, however, the arguments, queries, and preoccupations of the last section of *A Scholar’s Tale* align with similar avenues of thought in the works of Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard. Such connections are not, perhaps, surprising for a critic—whose writings have often been considered products of the so-called deconstructionist school—who decides to turn his attention to video games, the digital era, and virtual reality. As Hartman insists, media (particularly video games) are not *necessarily* forms of mediation, but I suspect he thinks they *can* be, and his ambivalence over what he calls the “Pluriverse” (borrowing from Tiziano Scarpa) seems to be rooted in a fear that media will never again allow the full risk of mediation. But he concludes, nevertheless, with a warning to “the technological genius” not to succumb to “the apparently transparent or faultless pathways” he or she creates. Hartman’s vision of media/mediation is thus more hopeful than that of Baudrillard, but less playful than that of Derrida. There is, for him, simply a possibility, one waiting to be nurtured by wisdom.

Yet whatever the case, whatever the possibilities, whatever Hartman’s connection to philosophers of the late-twentieth-century...he lives and thinks my present reality; his insights are of a piece with my daily life. The loss of an illusion of immediacy, the unswervable presentness of mediation, an inundation by the varieties of the Pluriverse—internet, television, advertise-

²⁰⁶ Hartman, *A Scholar’s Tale*, 163.

ments, video games, virtual reality—these are basic elements of the life I live, here and now. And I, like others, know and accept this; this is the way things are. Yet I do not refuse to hear Hartman’s small—almost reluctant—voice, when he writes, “the word [mediation] retains a religious resonance.” *How?* I wonder. *In what sense?* There is, I reckon, a clue to that in everything which has preceded this Conclusion.

In the earlier section on *White Noise*, I quoted John Duvall, Tom LeClair, and Joseph Dewey in their analyses of Jack Gladney’s encounter with Sister Hermann Marie. For Duvall, Sister Hermann represents “SIMUFAITH”: “One nun tells Jack, ‘Our lives are no less serious than if we professed real faith, real belief’, because the simulated belief serves the same structural function vis-à-vis the non-believer as actual belief.”²⁰⁷ Neither I nor Jesse Kavadlo argued that such a statement was incorrect. In fact, it rings true, but it also “echo[es] postmodernism’s sense of the rupture between signifier and signified,” as Kavadlo observes,²⁰⁸ or, in this case, the rupture and then subsequent erasure of difference, as Duvall follows Baudrillard in his analysis. Nevertheless, Duvall’s view of this rupture and erasure is firmly negative:

As DeLillo contemplates the effects of mediations that pose as the immediate, *White Noise* posits the fear of death as the ground of fascism; such fear creates desire for God/the father/the subject, the logos/text, and the telos/intention. Hitler, Elvis, the most photographed barn, television, shopping all manifest a collective desire for “Führer Knows Best,” a cultic aura to absorb the fear of dying. ... As *White Noise* argues, the

²⁰⁷ Duvall, “The (Super)Marketplace of Images,” 442.

²⁰⁸ Kavadlo, *Don DeLillo*, 36.

urge toward fascism is diffused throughout American mass media and its representations.²⁰⁹

Sister Hermann's simulated faith is one such mediation posing as immediacy then, another avenue for the diffusion of an urge toward fascism.

There is another angle on Sister Hermann's (dis)simulation, however; one I have already referenced. In *Don DeLillo: Balance at the Edge of Belief*, Kavadlo writes:

But perhaps it is not a matter of separating the word from the thing, the falseness and disappointment of simulation, as much as the crucial role that the nuns do play: one of sacrament, “ ‘to embody the old things, old beliefs. The devil, the angels, heaven, hell. If we did not pretend to believe these things, the world would collapse.’ ”²¹⁰

For Kavadlo, Jack and Sister Hermann's dialogue reflects DeLillo's investment in embodiment, “the word fleshed into action,” as he calls it; a suspension of the signifier-signified dilemma, a sacramental perspective. Indeed, in the earlier section I argued along similar lines, pressing the importance of the material and the ethno-religious. Tellingly, I think, both mine and Kavadlo's desire to take DeLillo seriously in this respect—not dismissing *White Noise* as pure, postmodern, ironic critique—aligns with a thought jotted down in one of his working notebooks for the novel: “If *sunsets* are more beautiful because the sky is contaminated, what are we supposed to do, turn *our backs to the sun*? We do what people have always done. Look and wonder.”²¹¹ For the same

²⁰⁹ Duvall, “The (Super)Marketplace of Images,” 451.

²¹⁰ Kavadlo, *Don DeLillo*, 36.

²¹¹ *DeLillo Archives*, Box 81, Folder 81.1. Elsewhere in the same working notebook, DeLillo writes, “[‘ve] tried to take these tabloids seriously.”

reason, I find Tony Tanner's critique of DeLillo's *Underworld*—"I cannot see it as the novelist's task to substitute 'religious fanaticism' for the cold prose of the real" (quoting, in fact, DeLillo's own "The Power of History")²¹²—welcome (and sobering). He, too, responds to DeLillo with the sense that the religious elements in his fiction is in earnest, even while admitting, like Kavaddo, that there is room enough for irony and ambivalence, as well. Here, however, with these closing thoughts, I'll strike out on another road.

In this mediated world, where the Lord no longer talks to us face to face—that is, if the Lord ever did—perhaps we are left with fictions. This is not Matthew Arnold's "most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry" ("The Study of Poetry" [1880]), nor is it George Santayana's "poetic nature of religion" (*Interpretations of Religion and Poetry* [1900]). It isn't even along the lines of Scott's ruminations in *Mao II*: "The novel used to feed our search for meaning. ... It was the great secular transcendence. The Latin mass of language, character, occasional new truth." My speculation is more tentative than these grand substitutions and fusions. DeLillo's writings confront us—and his characters—with religious experience, but it is religious experience always delivered with a "perhaps," a "maybe," or an "almost." When Sullivan tells her tale of *Somes Sound* in *Americana*, neither I nor David Bell know whether she's slipped into an ecstatic deeper telling or if her delivery is simply that polished. In *Underworld* Sister Alma Edgar rejoices when the face of a girl murdered in the neighborhood, Esmeralda, miraculously appears on a billboard advertising orange juice. Sister Grace Fahey, however, when pressed about this miracle says, "I don't know what I saw." The final chapter of *White Noise* recounts the "mystically charged" journey of Wilder Gladney, who pedals his tricycle across a six-lane expressway in traffic and is unharmed. It is the only extended scene of the novel not narrated by Jack Gladney in the first-person, yielding, instead, "to the awe-struck ac-

²¹² Tanner, "Afterthoughts on Don DeLillo's *Underworld*," 148

count of two elderly women.”²¹³ As Thomas Patrick Guffey heads out into a delirious, Catholic-festooned New York night, he assumes the guise of Lady Madonna. Returning in the morning, he dons his plainclothes and departs. With each story or encounter, DeLillo gives us the miraculous, lurid, ecstatic, wild stuff of religious experience, only to draw back and question; or he *begins* with a question mark and proceeds into experience; or ambiguity becomes, in fact, a part of the telling. Mediation is the mode of experience.

Whereas Emil Burke sought martyrdom and identification with Christ, Guffey transfigures himself, allowing Lady Madonna to roam the streets and minister to the strangers, the naked and the needy. Whereas Angelo Cavallo descended into the darkness of the tomb, seeking God the Father’s answers, Sister Grace calls the visions of Esmeralda on the orange juice advertisement “tabloid”—“the worst kind of tabloid superstition.” In the two early stories, “The River Jordan” and “Catch the ‘A’ Train”, DeLillo grappled with characters whose intensity led them to implosion—the world cascading suddenly into their dim, haunted lives. By the time he wrote *Americana* and “In the Men’s Room of the Sixteenth Century,” he had learned to diffuse that intensity, to offset it. The novel (and, for that matter, the short story) is no longer the “great secular transcendence.” It is, instead, a mediation. But that’s all we need, because the days of unmediated transcendence, escape, sublimity, mystical experience are behind us. We are no longer afraid of the fire, and we have no desire to go up into the mount. The Lord may speak with us face to face out of the cinders, but it is still Moses who shows us the word. Now we know in part, though we aren’t sure we want to know fully or be fully known. DeLillo gives me a sense of this mediation, this requisite distance. Not a relinquishment of hope, simply an affirmation of estrangement. For, indeed, “This is plenty. This is more than enough.”²¹⁴

²¹³ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 322.

²¹⁴ Geoffrey Hill, “September Song,” in *New & Collected Poems: 1952-1992* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 55.

As I exit, let me allow DeLillo our parting words:

And what do you remember, finally, when everyone has gone home and the streets are empty of devotion and hope, swept by river wind? Is the memory thin and bitter and does it shame you with its fundamental untruth—all nuance and wishful silhouette? Or does the power of transcendence linger, the sense of an event that violates natural forces, something holy that throbs on the hot horizon, the vision you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt?²¹⁵

²¹⁵ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 824.

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